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THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

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BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "FAUST," "THE NECROMANCER," "THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE," "POPE JOAN," "THE PIXY," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "MARY PRICE," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "KENNETH," "WAGNER, THE WEHR-WOLF," "THE SOLDIER'S WIFE," "THE RYE HOUSE PLOT," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "JOSEPH WILMOT," "MAY MIDDLETON," "ROSA LAMBERT," "LOUISA THE ORPHAN," "THE MODERN LITERATURE OF FRANCE," "PICKWICK ABROAD," "OMAR, A TALE OF THE WAR," ETC., ETC.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS,
BY F. GILBERT AND W. H. THWAITS.

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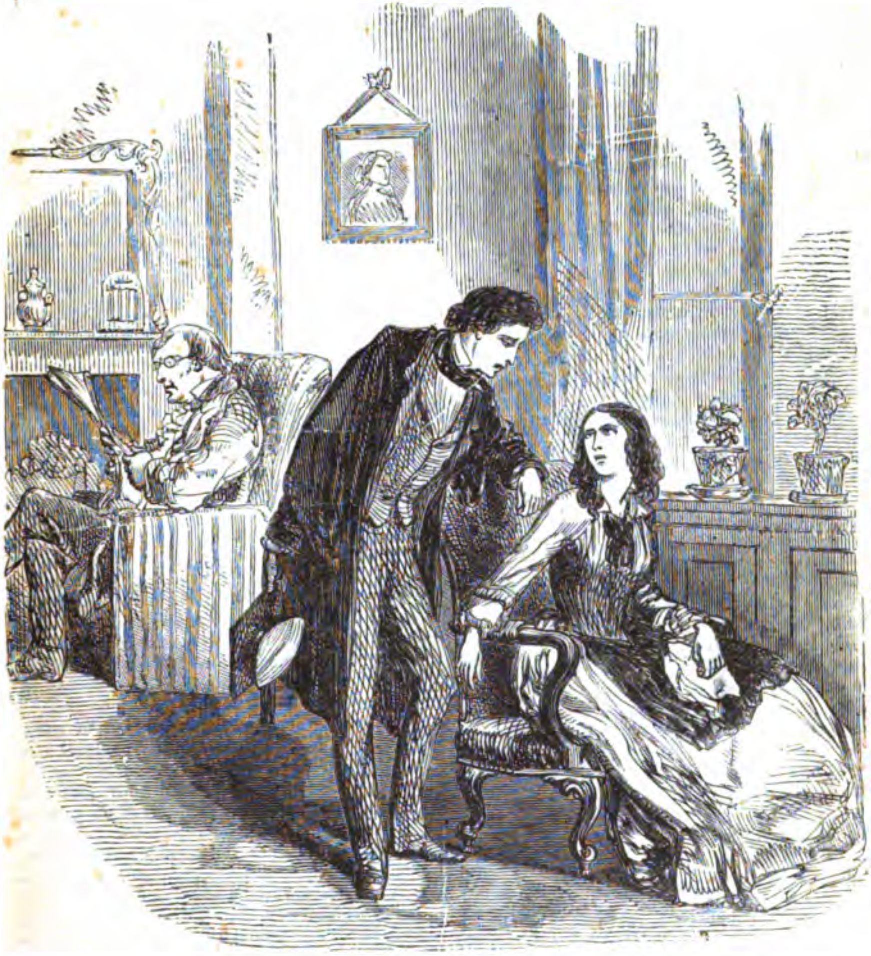
THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.



CHAPTER

THE BROTHERS.

It was in the middle of the year 1824, that two **brothers** were entered as graduates at one of the Colleges of Oxford University. Their name wa Vivian: they belonged to the noble family o Viviandale; but as their father was a junior scio thereof, his pecuniary means were somewhat limite The Hon. Mr. Vivian, who was a widower, had bu these two sons; and he hoped by giving them collegiate education, to fit them for such professions as they might respectively be led by taste or opportunity to adopt, and in which the family interest was likely to push them on. They were two handsome youths,—reflecting in their own persons the masculine beauty of a fine and haughty race,—with dispositions naturally good, but nevertheless already somewhat warped by a fond father's too great indulgence, as well as by the influences of that sphere of life in which they were born, and in the midst of which they had been caressed, petted, and flattered.

At the time when they entered Oxford University, Hugh, the elder, was in the opening of his twenty-first year—Bertram, the younger, a little past eighteen. They were of equal stature: but Hugh was more strongly and stoutly built than his brother,—not merely because his additional two years had given to his form more manly developments, but because the younger was naturally of a more slender and more gracefully symmetrical figure. Though it was impossible not to be struck by the haughtily handsome countenance of the elder, it was equally impossible to avoid drawing a comparison in favour of the more delicately chiselled Grecian profile of the latter. The expression of Hugh's features was entirely of the sense: that of Bertram's of the sentiment. While the former indicated a love of pleasure, strong passions, and a disposition which was sensuous as well as proud,—that of the latter denoted a rare intelligence blended with its pride; and the classic curl of the short upper lip declared an instinctive disdain of falsehood. Hugh's forehead was large, prominent, and massive—that of Bertram high and arched: the former pale from a too early acquaintance with dissipation—the latter pale likewise, but as if Genius itself had stamped that pallor there. Thus the brow of the elder brother seemed one on which passion and pleasure might in after years trace their lines; while that of the younger brother had all the immortality of the intellect predicted in its marble dream. The eyes of both were dark,—those of the elder flashing with all worldly feelings,—those of the younger with the lightnings of the mind. Hugh's hair was black, strong even to coarseness, and without a gloss: that of Bertram was of raven richness, shining with its own natural velvety brightness, and clustering in excessive luxuriance over the small, delicate, well-folded ears, and by the sides of the alabaster temples. Altogether, the elder brother was one whose fine appearance could not fail to command admiration, but nothing else: while that of the younger brother inspired the same feeling, but blended with interest, and almost love.

On entering upon their college life, Hugh soon formed acquaintances of dispositions congenial with his own, and gave himself up to manly sports by day and dissipated pleasures by night. Hunting, racing, boating, fishing, and cock-fighting, constituted the former: revelling, cards, and visits to forbidden haunts of pleasurable vice, composed the latter. On the other hand, Bertram—led by taste as well as by a sense of duty—applied himself to his studies: but he could not altogether escape the influences of an elder brother's example. In aristocratic families, where the casualties of nature may raise elder brothers to the possession of hereditary titles and estates, younger brothers are apt to look up to them with perhaps too much deference, from a sense that they may in process of time be placed in the position of destiny's arbiters in respect to the worldly career of those whom the laws of primogeniture and entail thus throw in dependence upon them. Moreover, there is often, even in the breasts of the best-disposed youths, a spirited and prideful disinclination to be taunted with being "bookworms" and "saints," when elder brothers invite them to partake in pleasures and amusements: and thus is it that well-principled lads are frequently led, by a sense of false shame, to quit pursuits in reality most congenial to their tastes, and deviate into others but little consonant with their inclinations. To all these varied but potent influences was Bertram Vivian subjected; and when once the ice was broken,—when once, in other words, he had left his studies to accompany his brother and that brother's boon companions amidst scenes of pleasure—the compunctious feelings attendant thereon gradually wore off. Not however that Bertram became inveterately dissipated, or that he abandoned himself so completely to pleasure, as did Hugh: but still he was not so steady as he ought to have been. The consequences were, that at the end of the first year of the two young men's collegiate experience, they found that they had far outstripped their pecuniary means, and that they had contracted debts which they dared not mention to their father, and which nevertheless without his succour they had not the remotest chance of liquidating.

The University tradesmen were not however clamorous. It was sufficient for them to know that the Vivians belonged to a family in which there were lofty titles that bespoke the accompaniment of great wealth; and they considered themselves tolerably safe in being sooner or later paid by some member of this aristocratic family. Hugh pursued his career of extravagance as if he were actual heir to the Marquisate of Viviandale from which the family lustre was derived,—between which and himself there were nevertheless great gulfs fixed: while Bertram, though without the moral courage to stop short in the pathway of ruin, was at times distracted by the sense of those difficulties that were gradually enmeshing him in a web which he feared to be inextricable. He had not, we say, the moral courage to check himself: that feeling of false shame, and that idea of more or less dependence on his brother, to which we have already alluded, prevented him from asserting the natural rectitude of his position and courageously obeying its impulses in spite of all other considerations. But fortunately for him, something occurred which turned all his thoughts and all his feelings into a completely new channel.

The brothers had been about a year at the University—they were now respectively somewhat past twenty-one and nineteen—when Bertram accidentally formed the acquaintance of a half-pay Captain in the Army and his daughter. The gentleman, whose name was Lacey, was stricken in years: he had married late in life—one child was the issue of this alliance—but the event which rendered him a father, made him also a widower. His means were limited: but he had done his best to rear his darling Eliza in a becoming manner. He had stinted himself to give her a good education; and as she grew up in loveliness and in virtue, she rewarded him for his care with the most devoted affection. Sensible of the numerous sacrifices which her father had made on her account, she felt that no degree of tenderness could be too great wherewith to recompense such a parent. His will, therefore, was her law; and if he had demanded any sacrifice at her hands, even that of her life, she would have made it resignedly——nay, more—cheerfully.

And exquisitely beautiful was Eliza Lacey. A year younger than Bertram Vivian,—that is to say, with eighteen summers upon her head at the time their acquaintance was formed,—youth and health lent all their charms to her face and figure. A cloud of raven tresses fell around her oval countenance: her complexion was matchless in its transparent purity,—pale on the lofty expansive brow—dazzlingly fair on the softly rounded shoulders, the arching neck, and the Hebe-modelled bust—but with the rich carnation tint upon the cheeks, and with a still more vivid and a riper crimson on the lips. The delicately pencilled raven brows arched nobly above eyes that were large and dark, and which though so bright, had an ineffable sweetness of expression. Her features were outlined with a perfect regularity; and her teeth were as white as pearls. A little above the medium stature of woman, her figure, just in all its proportions, had a certain graceful and flowing roundness in the contours and in the limbs, which added to its marvellous symmetry. All her movements, even to the slightest gesture, were characterized by an unstudied elegance; and thus, in every respect, was she the rarest model of feminine beauty. Her disposition was amiable and good—naturally trustful and confiding: incapable of guile herself, she suspected it not in others. Scandal and malice, jealousy and envy, were known to her only by name,—beyond which she had no experience of them. Her manners and her conversation were modelled by her character — frank, artless, and fascinating. Yet though so utterly unacquainted with the darker sides of humanity and the treacheries of the world, she was not on this account to be regarded as an easy victim for seductive perfidy: her very innocence was in itself a defence. The intuitive sense of her sex's dignity and of virginal propriety, would in a moment have led her to resent the slightest word that shocked, or the first look that threatened her with insult.

Such was Eliza Lacey. She dwelt with her father in a small but comfortable house on the outskirt of the University City,—their only attendant being an elderly female who was in Captain Lacey's service at the time of his marriage, and who had therefore known his charming and interesting daughter from the moment of her birth. Captain Lacey, on leaving the Army and settling down into married life, had fixed his abode at Oxford,—not exactly through choice, but from the fact that the death of a relative had bequeathed him a small property consisting of three houses. In one of these he lived: the other two were let—and the moderate rentals derived therefrom, added to his own half-pay, constituted his entire income. This was small enough: but still, by dint of the strictest frugality, the little family was enabled to maintain a respectable appearance and avoid debt. The possession of the houses likewise relieved Captain Lacey's mind from the bitter anxiety which he would otherwise have felt at the thought of death snatching him away from the world ere his daughter should be comfortably settled in it: for though his half-pay would die with him, yet the rents of the little property would produce a sufficiency for the subsistence of her who would be left behind him. Thus, though well aware that the City of Oxford was by no means the most suitable place for a beautiful girl, as Eliza was, to reside in,—Captain Lacey was in a certain measure chained to the spot; and moreover, he trusted to his daughter's admirable principles as a sufficient safeguard against whatsoever temptation might be thrown in her way. He had however been careful in avoiding the acquaintance of any of the young collegians; and though several attempts were made on their part to obtain an introduction to Captain Lacey and his daughter, they had all proved ineffectual.

It is needless to particularize the details of the accident which threw Bertram Vivian in their way. Suffice it to say that on one occasion he was fortunate enough in being close at hand when a half-tipsy undergraduate, meeting the young lady in the street, offered her an insult: and he struck the fellow to the ground. To escort Miss Lacey to her home, became a courteous necessity on his part, and which she could not without rudeness decline: to be invited to walk in and receive the thanks of her father, was an equally natural sequence. During this brief interview, Captain Lacey was so favourably impressed with his daughter's deliverer, that when the latter solicited permission to call and pay his respects again, utter churlishness could have alone refused it. He did call; and he became enamoured of Eliza Lacey. The tone of his conversation, his agreeable manners, the delicacy of his conduct, and the unstudied evidences of a fine intellect which developed themselves,—all contributed to confirm Captain Lacey's favourable opinion on the one hand, and to make their impression upon Eliza's heart on the other. The Captain, without setting himself studiously and deliberately to work to inquire into the young man's prospects, thought it, when he happened to learn that Bertram belonged to a noble family, quite sufficient to prove that these prospects must be good; and though hitherto he had entertained a very indifferent opinion—bordering indeed almost upon aversion—for the Oxford Collegians, he was now inclined to fancy that Bertram Vivian constituted at least *one* very favourable exception.

Bertram called as often as he dared, consistently with delicacy, when this acquaintance first commenced: his visits however soon became more frequent; and from the very fact that he found pleasure in taking a quiet cup of tea and passing his evenings in that humble parlour, the Captain argued everything in favour of the young man's steadiness. Thus was it that as weeks grew into months, and Bertram's attentions became more and more marked towards Eliza, the father inwardly rejoiced on beholding the evidences of a mutual attachment on the part of the young couple: for he felt that his gray hairs would go down with additional resignation, and even with contentment, to the grave, if previous to his death he had the happiness of seeing his beloved daughter comfortably settled in life. If the Captain had been wise—or in other words, more cunningly and shrewdly worldly-minded—he would have taken the trouble to inquire into the young man's prospects,—when he would have found that though belonging to the Viviandale family, yet as the younger son of a younger branch, Bertram had nothing but that family's interest to push him on in the world. The retired old officer was however naturally indolent—too apt to take his own views of things as positively acquired facts—and withal exceedingly self-willed: so that whatever he got into his head, he regarded as something quite as positive, real, and actual, as if it had received ten thousand unmistakable corroborations.

Months passed on; and Bertram Vivian became steadiness itself. Scrupulously keeping secret his acquaintance with the Lacey family, he withdrew himself from the society of Hugh and his companions,—love rendering him utterly indifferent to the taunts which a false shame would not at one time have suffered him to endure. His brother fancied that he was seized with a studying-fit; and being at length tired of endeavouring to draw the "bookworm," as he called him, from his pursuits, he vented his annoyance in such terms as "milksop" and "saint," and ultimately left Bertram altogether to his own courses. Thus, all the time that the younger brother could spare from his studies—and some too which he pilfered therefrom—he passed at Captain Lacey's house.

It was a dream of bliss in which the two lovers were plunged. Months and months had elapsed since their acquaintance first commenced; and though their lips had breathed no avowal of affection, yet their looks had mutually told the tale. They never walked out together: because Bertram did not choose to stand the chance of encountering, when in the companionship of Eliza, any of his College friends—least of all his brother. He was fearful of being dragged into the necessity of introducing them: and from such an idea he recoiled loathingly. It was sufficient happiness for him to sit by the charming girl's side in the comfortable little parlour, conversing with her—reading to her—looking over books with her—gazing upon her while she worked—and exchanging tender glances. Even the presence of her father was not felt as a restraint: for the old gentleman, when not dozing in his arm-chair, treated him with as much kindness as if he were a son—considered him as good as formally engaged to his daughter—and smiled upon them both. But if the father took no pains to make direct inquiries into the young man's prospects, the artless and unsophisticated Eliza, it may be easily supposed, made none at all. She just knew that he was connected with the Viviandale family—and no more. As for there being anything selfish in her love, the Alpine snows were not purer. It was a youthful heart's first virgin affection that was given to Bertram Vivian:—on his side it was a young man's first love, profound—glowing—impassioned—but all a dream, without the soberness of waking reflections. He paused not to ask himself whether this vision of bliss could ever be realized—whether it were possible that he should ever lead Eliza Lacey to the altar. The present was so full of rapturous enjoyment, that he looked not beyond it. Youthful love is in itself faith and hope: it is the religion of the heart, as the worship of God is the religion of the soul. It has a sort of tacit reliance upon the future, without studying the grounds on which such reliance is based: it believes in paradise, as the worshipper of the Almighty believes in paradise also—without knowing when or how the period of enjoyment is to be brought about.

Thus a year passed away from the date of Bertram's acquaintance with the Laceys,—when, in the middle of 1826, he was suddenly startled from his dream of bliss. A death in the family, by removing the old Marquis, called another to assume the coronet; and the two young men were summoned peremptorily from Oxford to attend the funeral of the deceased peer. The same letter gave them to understand that the circumstance of their heavy debts had come to their father's knowledge—that they must be careful to bring with them lists of their liabilities, with a view to their prompt and equitable settlement—and that they were to give notice to their tutors that they would return to Oxford no more. If it were a merely temporary separation from Eliza, Bertram could have borne it—as indeed he had borne, during the vacation, a brief interruption to their constant companionship. But now that he was given to understand that his father's circumstances, being somewhat improved by the death in the family, enabled him at once to provide for his two sons, and that therefore their collegiate career was at an end, the young man's grief knew no bounds.

In a state bordering upon frenzy, he flew to Captain Lacey's house, and sought an interview with Eliza. Her father was out for his usual walk at the time: and some household duties had kept the young maiden at home. The unexpected visit from her lover at an unusual hour, would have been fraught with ineffable pleasure, were it not for the distressing intelligence he had to communicate. They threw themselves into each other's arms—they embraced tenderly: it was the first time that ever their lips had met in kisses—the first time that ever Eliza's heart beat against Bertram's own! They were both now awakened, as if by a thunderclap, from their dream of bliss; and for the first half-hour of this parting interview, their affliction bordered upon despair. But did we not ere now say that love itself is faith and hope?—and it is not in the nature of youthful souls to abandon themselves altogether to utter desperation. Neither was it in this case. By degrees they grew calmer; and Bertram whispered vows, and protestations, and hopes in the ear of his beloved.

"My father," he said, "purposes at once to embark me in some career in which I may doubtless acquire fortune and eminence. The family to which I belong, is rich and powerful; and with all the advantages of such interest, my struggle against the world can neither be a painful nor a long one. Besides—sweetest, dearest girl—your image will serve as my guiding-star—the beacon of hope—the emblem of that reward which shall crown all my arduous toils! A few years—perhaps only two or three may be necessary—will soon pass: we are both so young, dearest Eliza!—we shall then be young still!—and when we meet again to part no more—Oh, what happiness will await us! And then too, whatever may be the career for which my father destines me, I may from time to time be enabled to hasten thither, on the wings of love, to see you. We can write to each other; and in all these prospects—in all these circumstances—there are many sources of consolation!"

The head of the weeping girl—that beauteous head, drooping like a tulip on its slender stalk—sank on her lover's shoulder; and she murmured expressions of unchanging love, as well as of gratitude for the solace he proffered her.

"You are mine, adored Eliza!" he said: "you are mine—and here in the face of heaven, do I pledge myself wholly and solely unto you! Take this ring, my well-beloved: it has the initial of my Christian name graven on the stone. Keep it, Eliza, as an earnest of those vows which I so solemnly, sacredly plight you now."

Almost blinded by her tears, the lovely being placed the ring in her bosom; and drawing off one from her own fair finger, she murmured in accents that were broken and scarcely audible, yet filled with the soft plaintive harmony of her dulcet voice,—"And you, dearest Bertram, take this! It bears also the initial of my name: I will not tell you that I shall remain constant: my own heart gives me that assurance,—and you, who can read the secrets of that heart, know that it is entirely and inseparably thine!"

Bertram took the ring—pressed it to his lips—and placed it upon his finger. Then the moment for parting came. Oh! who can depict the anguish — the excruciation of feeling — which marked that moment? The calmness which had succeeded the first ebullition of despair, and which in itself was only comparative, vanished altogether. Bertrand strained his adored Eliza in convulsive violence to his breast: they both felt as if the tenderest chords of their hearts were being rudely torn asunder. They separated in a state bordering upon frenzy: Bertram rushed from the house—while the young maiden, sinking upon a seat, felt as if she and happiness had shaken hands for ever.

Captain Lacey returned home about a quarter of an hour afterwards, and when the agonizing intentness of Eliza's affliction had somewhat passed away—or at least was mitigated by the hopes which she busied herself to conjure up. For, Oh! it was so necessary for that young heart to sustain itself with hope! The Captain was thunderstruck when his daughter informed him of what had occurred. He—good, credulous, but self-willed man—had arranged everything so comfortably in his own mind. Bertrand would no doubt stay another year longer at the University—he would then be well provided for by his family—and his marriage with Eliza would at once take place as a matter of course. Such was the Captain's foreshadowing: but the dream was suddenly dispelled—and with the destruction of his delusions, came worldly-minded reflections, thickly pouring in. His eyes were now opened to the fatal error he had committed: he ought to have inquired at the outset whether in due time Bertram Vivian would be in a position to settle in marriage. He now comprehended that so far from anything of the sort, the young man had to enter on the career of life, and, with certain chances given him, carve them out into substantial shape as best he could. The Captain was by no means such an idiot as not to bethink himself that separation and altered circumstances make a wonderful change in the youthful heart; and firmly convinced as he had previously been that all would go on smoothly in love's career, to be crowned with the marriage of the young couple in the end,—so settled did his conviction now become that the whole thing was as good as broken off between them. He inwardly cursed himself for his folly: but out of regard for his daughter, he did not at once suffer her to perceive how altered his views were in respect to the hope that he should ever see her the bride of Bertram Vivian.

A few days elapsed—at the expiration of which interval, Eliza received a letter, dated from Oaklands, the seat of the head of the family to which her lover belonged, and which was situated in Hampshire—far away from the city of Oxford. There it was that the old Marquis had died, and his successor had taken possession of the hereditary honours and estates: there it was, too, that all the members of the family were now assembled, to attend the grand funeral which was to consign the deceased peer to his last resting-place. The letter was such a passion-breathing epistle as an enthusiastic lover might be expected to write, and as an adoring maiden might expect to receive. It told her that Bertram's father, now Lord Vivian, had not as yet spoken to either of his sons in respect to his intentions concerning them; but that such communication was reserved until after the funeral,—when Bertram would write again to his beloved.

And in a few more days another letter came. But if it were written almost in despair,—so it likewise nearly filled with despair the heart of the affectionate maiden. Bertram was at once going abroad as a paid Attaché to the English Embassy in the United States; and seas would therefore soon roll between himself and his beloved. So hurried were the preliminaries for his departure, and so closely was he watched by his sire, that he had no opportunity of obeying the dictates of his heart, and flying to Oxford to bid Eliza a last farewell. But he renewed all his pledges of devoted affection—reminded her of the exchange of rings—and conjured her to sustain her spirits for his sake.

Captain Lacey, to whom these letters were shown by his daughter—who never in her life kept anything secret from her father—was more than ever convinced of the infatuated madness of his own conduct in suffering the young couple to linger on in their dream of bliss while himself hoped that it would be ultimately realized. He saw that his daughter's happiness was altogether at stake; and painful though it were for him to take such a step, it was nevertheless his duty to make her aware of his sentiments. Better for her now to envisage at once the uncertainty of her heart's hope ever being fulfilled, than for her to continue cherishing that hope with the prospect of having it blighted in the end! He therefore gently and gradually, and with ill-subdued emotions, represented to her that Bertram Vivian had evidently to commence the upward toil of life—that years might elapse ere he would be sufficiently independent to come and claim an almost portionless young lady as his bride,—that in the meanwhile the ardour of his passion might cool—new faces might inspire new sentiments—and even if another affection might not beguile him from his first love, prudential reasons might induce him to form some brilliant matrimonial alliance. Eliza listened with mingled grief and astonishment to her father's observations; and enthusiastically did she express her conviction—uttered however amidst torrents of tears—that Bertram would remain faithful. Captain Lacey had nerved his fortitude to the accomplishment of a certain duty; and he was resolved not to do it by halves. He therefore went on to say that Eliza, if she were prudent, would do well to prepare herself for any eventual disappointment—and that painful though it were for him to issue a harsh injunction, he felt the absolute necessity of forbidding all correspondence between herself and Bertram,—adding that he himself would write the young gentleman a letter to explain his views on the subject.

He did write such a letter. It was kindly and considerately worded,—recommending Mr. Bertram Vivian to abstain, for at least a couple of years, from any correspondence with his daughter—suggesting that this interval would fully test the state of his feelings with regard to her—and promising that if at the end of the period he should still experience the same attachment, he (Captain Lacey) would be only too delighted and proud to permit Eliza to renew her engagement with the Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian.

The young lady's good sense showed her that her father was acting with a due regard to her welfare; and moreover, it was her habit to submit implicitly to his will. She had the fullest confidence in Bertram: she had equal confidence in the strength of her own love. Two years—Oh! what was this interval as a test for that love which she felt assured would outlive centuries, if human existence itself ranged over ages! The very necessity of clinging to hope made her picture to herself this interval as soon passing away; and *then* there need be no farther barrier to her happiness! The engagement would be renewed—or rather re-acknowledged by her parent; and if years should still elapse ere she became Bertram's bride, she could wait, happy and contented in the consciousness of possessing his love.

The letter was despatched at once to Bertram Vivian: it reached him on the eve of his departure for the United States—and his reply came by return of post. He bowed to Captain Lacey's decision,—not but that it pained him sorely: yet he bowed, so that this very submission might be taken as a proof of his love, shown to the daughter through the deferential respect paid to the father. But he besought Captain Lacey to assure Eliza of his undying constancy—of his imperishable devotion!

CHAPTER II

THE DUKE OF MARCHMONT.

A YEAR had passed away—it was now the summer of 1827—when the English newspapers gave some meagre and scantily outlined account of a deplorable catastrophe which had taken place on an American river. A pleasure-vessel, having a numerous party on board, amongst whom were several gentlemen attached to the English Embassy in the United States, had been upset in a sudden squall—and every soul had perished. The paragraph gave the names of some of the principal personages who had thus met their death: and amongst those names was that of Bertram Vivian.

Captain Lacey was reading an Oxford paper one morning after breakfast, when this paragraph met his eyes; and the sudden ejaculation which burst from his lips, caused Eliza to question him with trembling anxiety as to the source of his emotions. He dared not conceal the fact from her: but ere he showed her the paragragh itself, he gradually broke the fatal truth. Even before he had finished, poor Eliza comprehended it all! Not a tear escaped her eyes—no word fell from her lips: but pale as marble, she sat the image of dull, deep, blank despair. Her father caught her in his arms: then the flood-gates of her ineffable affliction were opened—and she wept long, bitterly, agonizingly! Oh, for the hopes which that heart had cherished, to be thus blighted all in a moment!—Oh, for the fabric of expectant bliss which her faithful and trusting soul had built up, to be thus shattered in an instant! It was too cruel. Captain Lacey, with the tears running down his wrinkled cheeks, besought her to calm her sorrow for *his* sake: but the entreaty was a long time vain. Hours passed ere Eliza could even bring herself to think deliberately upon this fearful loss: days passed ere she could awaken herself to a sense of the necessity of a pious and holy resignation to the will of heaven. And during those days, it appeared to her as if it were all a dream, and that her brain was only morbidly reeling beneath the weight of some imagined calamity. In the night she would start up from a feverish and troubled sleep—wakened as if by the anguished voice of a drowning one thrilling on her ears,—and pressing her hands violently to her throbbing temples, she would ask herself if it could possibly be true. At length this dream-like state of being passed away, and left her to the astounding sense of the awful reality. She prayed to heaven for strength to bear up against it: but there were times when she felt as if she were going mad. Then, passionately—Oh, how passionately, would she press Bertram's ring to her lips; and in this memento of his love in other and happier days, was her only consolation. Alas, how poor a one!—and yet it *was* a solace, though feeble as the last thread which retains the invalid to existence in the depth of a malady when the crisis for best or worst is come!

Misfortunes never arrive alone. But a few weeks after the receipt of the intelligence from the United States, a fire broke out in Captain Lacey's house; and so rapid was the spread of the devastating element, that all three dwellings were reduced in a few brief hours to blackened ruins. Scarcely an article of furniture was saved: the inmates considered themselves fortunate in escaping with life alone. But this was not the full extent of the terrible calamity. Fire insurance was not so generally practised in 1827 as it is now-a-days; and unfortunately Captain Lacey's property was not insured. The principal source of his income was thus cut off irretrievably—

irreparably; and he found himself in his old age, with ill-health and infirmities growing rapidly upon him, reduced to his half-pay—a mere scanty pittance. And this too would die with him. What was to become of his daughter at his death—— Oh, what? There was yet another misfortune in store for the poor Captain and Eliza: for their faithful domestic, who had been with them so many years, was thrown upon a sick-bed through the shock occasioned by the fire; and in a few days she breathed her last.

There was a widow lady in London named Mrs. Bailey, who was very distantly related to Captain Lacey, and with whom he had corresponded at distant intervals. She was rich—occupied a splendid mansion at the West End of the metropolis—frequented the best society—and gave grand parties. A thorough woman of the world, she had all the callousness, amounting almost to heartlessness, usually characteristic of one who makes fashionable appearances her whole and sole study. The only notice she had condescended to take of her humble and poor relations at Oxford, was the sending them a basket of game and a turkey at Christmas, accompanied by a brief note conveying the compliments of the season; and the acknowledgment of the gift, together with an expression of similar compliments, formed the extent of the Captain's periodical correspondence with Mrs. Bailey. But now that the poor Captain had such anxious cares relative to his daughter, he wrote a long letter to Mrs. Bailey, detailing the serious alteration of his circumstances in consequence of the fire. In this letter he spoke with a father's pride of the exquisite beauty of Eliza, the amiability of her disposition, and her dutiful conduct as a daughter,—adding that his means had enabled him, though by dint of great sacrifices, to give her an education not altogether apart from certain elegant accomplishments. Now, this letter arrived at a time when Mrs. Bailey felt the want of some new attraction to give zest to her entertainments, which the fashionable world began to consider rather "slow affairs," the same faces being constantly met in Mrs. Bailey's drawing-rooms. The idea struck her that her requirement might be fulfilled in the person of Miss Lacey, if she were even only half as beautiful as the paternal pride had depicted her. She accordingly lost no time in writing back to Oxford, assuring Captain Lacey, with much seeming kindness in the wording of her letter, that she sympathized deeply with him in his misfortunes; and inviting himself and Eliza to come and pass a few months with her in Grosvenor Square. She enclosed a bank-note for twenty pounds,—begging that the remittance might not be taken as an offence, but merely as a subsidy to defray the travelling expenses of those who were about to confer an obligation on herself by giving her their companionship.

Captain Lacey was overjoyed at this really unexpected goodness, as he considered it, on the part of his relative. Eliza would fain have lingered a few weeks longer at Oxford, to compose her mind somewhat after so many recent and frightful calamities: but she saw that her father was now all anxiety to get to London—and with her wonted amiable submissiveness, she stifled the half-prayer, half-remonstrance which had risen to her lips. The preparations they had to make were few; and they quitted the humble lodging to which they had retired after the conflagration had deprived them of their home. During the journey, Captain Lacey implored and enjoined his daughter to render herself as agreeable as possible to Mrs. Bailey,—by which, in plain terms, he meant that Eliza was to shake off her low spirits and her looks of sadness by all means in her power. Misfortunes as well as anxieties on his daughter's account, had rendered Captain Lacey worldly-minded and selfish: he hoped that in Mrs. Bailey's gay saloons, Eliza would captivate some wealthy personage;—and ever ready to jump at conclusions, the Captain regarded it as almost as good as settled that Eliza should form a brilliant alliance. He did not however impart his views to his daughter; and the poor maiden little suspected that he was dreaming of fresh matrimonial projects on her behalf, within only a few weeks after the receipt of the frightful intelligence which had given a death-blow to the former ones. Though inwardly full of sadness—though feeling that, the first affections of her heart being so cruelly blighted, she never again could love—indeed though considering it to be a sacred duty to cling to the image of her lost Bertram,—Eliza assumed as much external calmness as she could possibly call to her aid; while the natural vigour of her constitution had prevented the bitterness of affliction from making any ravages upon her beauty, beyond chasing away the colour from her cheeks. Therefore when she arrived in London, and was introduced to her relative Mrs. Bailey, she appeared to be of a loveliness so exquisite and so interesting, with the expression of pensiveness upon her countenance, that the old lady, in the enthusiasm of joy, gave both herself and her father a welcome that seemed disinterestedly cordial.

It was the month of September when the Laceys arrived in London; and the greater portion of the fashionable world being out of town, it was not the season for Mrs. Bailey's parties. She herself seldom went out of town: she disliked the country—hated the sea-side—and would not for worlds give up the amusements of shopping in Regent and Bond Streets. It was therefore fortunate for Eliza's state of mind that she was not at once called upon to appear in the midst of crowded assemblies; and during the three months which now passed after her arrival in London, her grief for her lover's loss settled itself into such a holy resignation that she was no longer agitated with paroxysms of wild grief and convulsive weepings. But the expression of her eyes grew softer: a melancholy pensiveness settled upon her features,—relieved however by that half-sad half-sweet smile which resignation gives to the human countenance, and which is so touchingly interesting when on the beautiful face of woman.

The year 1827 was drawing towards its close, when the gaieties of the metropolis commenced. At first there were only small parties at Mrs. Bailey's house: but these grew larger and larger in proportion as the members of the fashionable world flocked back to their town-mansions. Thus Eliza was not precipitated all in a moment into the midst of brilliant assemblies: she was led on by degrees to become accustomed to the bustle, animation, and gaiety of West-End society; and though she would infinitely rather have remained n the solitude of her own chamber, to reflect on the image of the lost one,—yet she yielded to the entreaties of her father that she would make herself agreeable to Mrs. Bailey in all things; and it was precisely to shine as a star that Mrs. Bailey had invited her to London.

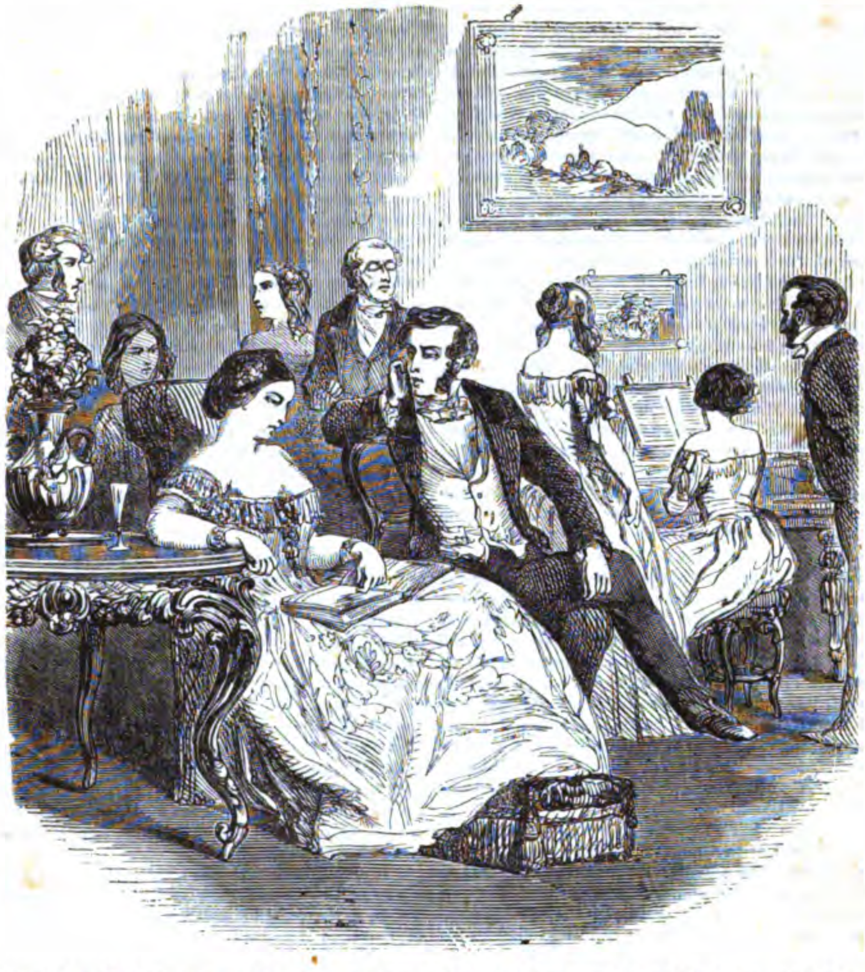
Eliza Lacey soon became the object of universal admiration. Her beauty was considered to be naturally of a pensive and touchingly interesting cast: no one except her father knew how recent incidents had softened the former sunlight of her loveliness into this half-subdued tone. When in the midst of a brilliant company, with flowers upon her brow and diamonds on her neck, none of those who surrounded her suspected that the former rested above a brain that had throbbed to the most harrowing affliction—or that the latter lay above a heart where love, the fairest of all the gems of the soul, had become lustreless for ever.

It was in the first month of the year 1828 that Mrs. Bailey gave a more than usually grand party, for the purpose of doing honour to a guest of the highest rank who was to be present. This was the Duke of Marchmont. He was a man in his fifty-fifth year—tall and upright—of a lofty demeanour—a severe and thoughtful expression of countenance. His bearing had all the aristocratic hauteur of his high rank, attempered however by the manners of a polished gentleman. His face was long—his features were prominent—his complexion was pale, almost to sallowness: but he had evidently been very handsome in his time, and might still be pronounced a fine man. His hair and whiskers, once dark, were now of a greyish tinge: but his teeth were so admirably preserved, and so singularly white for a person of his age, that when he smiled, they gave to his countenance a younger aspect. He had never been married, and had not until recently wore a ducal coronet upon his brow.

Such was the Duke of Marchmont—a nobleman possessed of great wealth, with a splendid town-mansion, and three palatial residences, with their accompanying estates, in three distinct counties. Many a cap, to use a vulgar phrase, was therefore set at this great peer: many a manœuvring mother made excruciating efforts to lead the ducal attention to her marriageable daughters. Hitherto all in vain!—but on the night of Mrs. Bailey's grand entertainment, his Grace's heart seemed to be smitten—he was evidently fascinated with the bewitching beauty of one fair creature there—and this was Eliza Lacey. But the young lady herself was the only one present who did not observe anything pointed or marked in the Duke's attentions. Mingled with her resignation, there was a kind of dreamy, listless apathy which still clung to her, as if the senses had not as yet completely recovered the stunning influence of the blow they had received several months back. Weeks passed on: at every entertainment given by Mrs. Bailey, the Duke of Marchmont was sure to be present: at whatsoever house Eliza visited in company with her relative, there was the Duke likewise sure to be. He was paying his addresses to her as visibly and as sedulously as a man could: everybody else saw and knew it—the object of these attentions alone remained unaware that they were proffered. She still continued to look forth upon the world as if from the midst of a mental dreaminess within: there was something more mechanical than voluntary in her conversation, her looks, and her smiles—in her bearing too, and in all her movements. But inasmuch as there was a consistent uniformity in her tone and demeanour, with an ineffable sweetness over all, it could not possibly have struck any but the very closest observer of human nature, that in the still waters of her soul a profound grief lay buried. Such observers are not often found in the gay circles of fashionable life; and the Duke of Marchmont himself, though shrewd and intelligent, was not much versed in the reading of the female heart.

At length the Duke took an opportunity to make an offer of his hand to Miss Lacey. She heard him with an astonishment perfectly bewildering, but which gave to her an air of modest maidenly confusion. She could not utter a word: a veil had suddenly fallen from her eyes—the haze through which she had looked upon things around her, abruptly yielded to clearness. She comprehended for the first time that she had been the object of attentions bestowed for several months, and that in the very dreaminess and listlessness of her mind, she might have seemed to regard them as welcome because she had accepted them. It was one afternoon when the Duke called at Mrs. Bailey's house, and when he found Eliza alone in the drawing-room, that he made her the offer of his hand. Taking her bewildered amazement and the subsequent emotions for bashful confusion, and this confusion for a tacit assent, he raised her hand to his lips—kissed it with respectful tenderness—and intimating that he would seek her father, quitted the room. Then, more vividly perhaps than for some time past it had done, rose up before Eliza's mental vision the image of the lost Bertram; and clasping her hands convulsively, she sat in dismay—indeed almost in horror—under the crushing influence of the thought that she had unwittingly proved faithless to that image. The ring with the initial B was in her bosom: it ever lay next to her heart. She drew it forth, kissing it in the resuscitated wildness of her grief; while the tears flowed in torrents from her eyes.

She had grown comparatively calm again—the ring was replaced in her bosom—the traces of her weeping were wiped away—and she was deliberately reflecting how to disabuse the Duke of Marchmont of the error into which he had fallen in supposing that his attentions were agreeable to her, when the door opened and her father entered the room. Though full of infirmities, the old man rushed towards her—caught her in his arms—strained her to his breast—and ere she could give utterance to a word, poured forth a perfect deluge of language,—thanking her for having accepted her ducal suitor—congratulating himself on living to behold his daughter on the verge of so brilliant an alliance—declaring that his mind was relieved from a myriad anxieties—and ending by assuring her that his grey hairs would now go down in contented resignation to the grave.' Eliza was shocked, astounded, and bewildered. She saw that her father's mind was bent upon this match, and that it would literally break his heart if she rejected the ducal overture. Yet her brain whirled: it was almost maddened at the idea of becoming another's—she who in her own soul had vowed a life of celibacy to the memory of her lost lover! Her father re-



newed his thanks—renewed his own self-congratulations—wept, laughed, danced, and behaved like the veriest child. Mrs. Bailey entered in the midst of this scene; and embracing Eliza, proffered her own congratulations. The poor young lady was overwhelmed with all these demonstrations of exuberant joy: she strove to speak—her tongue refused utterance to what she would have said—her emotions choked her; and when she burst into tears, she was again embraced by her father and Mrs. Bailey in their turns.

In the course of that day, however, she found an opportunity to speak with her sire alone; and she also spoke with calmness. She assured him that she did not love the Duke—that the love she had borne for Bertram was the first and the last of which her soul was susceptible—and that her heart was entombed in the watery depths which had engulfed the adored lost one. Captain Lacey was at first half frantic at the idea of his daughter rejecting this brilliant alliance; he wept—he knelt—he prayed—he beat his breast—he tore his hair—he threw himself, grovelling in wretchedness, upon the carpet. Oh! could the affectionate daughter resist that spectacle?—she who had ever entertained so illimitable a sense of the many, many sacrifices her father had made for her—she who had always held herself ready to make any sacrifice for him! We will not dwell upon this distressing scene; suffice it to say that at the expiration of an hour—in which all the acutest feelings through which the human soul can pass were essentialized and concentrated—Eliza yielded. With the resignation of martyrdom—with the calm pale statue-like despair of a victim consenting to self-immolation for some purpose of stupendous import, she agreed to become the bride of the Duke of Marchmont.

But there was one stipulation which she positively laid down. It was now the close of April, 1828: upwards of a couple of months must elapse until the two years should be completed since her father's written pledge to Bertram Vivian that under certain circumstances the engagement with him should be renewed; and though the afflicted Eliza entertained not the faintest hope that there was the possibility of aught occurring, or of a miracle being wrought, to give scope for those circumstances,—it nevertheless seemed a superstitiously sacred duty that the full time should run out. And it required also two complete months to finish the year since the intelligence had reached her of Bertram's death; and though circumstances had prevented her from wearing sable garments as a tribute to his memory, her heart at least required the completion of a year's mourning——a mourning, however, that she knew would be eternal! Her stipulation therefore was that the bridal-day—the day of her immense self-sacrifice—should not be fixed at any date earlier than the month of July. To this her father readily promised concurrence: the principal point was gained—and that was sufficient.

The interval passed far too quickly for the afflicted Eliza: but outwardly she suffered no traces of her soul's utter despair to present themselves. She had made up her mind to self-immolation: she resolved that her martyrdom should excruciate only herself. She felt that she had no right to suffer the Duke to perceive that she was a victim: neither did she wish to mar the happiness which her father was now experiencing in the last days of his existence. In short, she armed herself with a preterhuman courage; and but for the paleness of her cheeks and the slight deepening of the air of pensive sadness upon her countenance, no one could have told that another dagger had been driven into her already too cruelly wounded heart.

On the 10th of July, 1828, the marriage was solemnized, with some degree of privacy, and only in the midst of a select circle,—none of the Duke's relatives being present. His Grace had his own reasons for not inviting to the bridal those who were most nearly allied to him; inasmuch as his marriage was a fatal blow—or at least might prove so, if blessed with issue—to all who would profit by his death if he remained single. And Captain Lacey had his own reasons likewise for encouraging the Duke in the idea of private nuptials: but what these reasons were, he explained not beforehand to his daughter. She herself asked no questions: she knew not even the names of the Duke's relatives, nor who they were: she sought to know nothing more than circumstances brought to her knowledge—and this knowledge was limited to the fact that he on whom she bestowed her hand was the Duke of Marchmont, and that she was now a Duchess.

CHAPTER III.

THE DUCHESS OF MARCHMONT.

The ceremony was over—the wedding breakfast, given by Mrs. Bailey, and which was of a most splendid description, likewise reached an end—the instant was approaching when Eliza, now Duchess of Marchmont, was to bid adieu to her father and her relative, and accompany her husband to whichsoever of the country-seats it was where the honeymoon was to be passed—but which the young bride knew not. She was even ignorant of the very names of them all. Retiring from the breakfast-table, she sought the chamber where her maid was in readiness to assist her in making the requisite change in her apparel for the journey; and it struck strange—almost unnatural to Eliza's ear when she was addressed as "your grace" and "my lady." Her toilet being finished, she repaired to a parlour where she knew, according to an intimation given by her maid, that her father wished to say a few words to her in private, and bestow without restraint the last embrace before she was separated from him. There she found the old man in a state of happiness strangely blended with a nervous excitement—but assuredly not with grief at the prospect of parting. Not but that he loved his daughter dearly, as the reader well knows: his pride however was too highly gratified—his relief from cares on account of her future welfare, was too complete—and perhaps his satisfaction at the result of his plans was too full, to leave room for aught savouring of sorrow. Only that nervous excitement was blended, as a sort of alloy, with his other feelings; and this the unsophisticated Eliza took for the tinge of grief which it was natural to suppose that he experienced, but which he really did not feel.

"My dearest girl," he said, clasping her in his arms, "your beauty and your worth have raised you to the highest pinnacle. Once more—and for the last time—must I allude to something connected with the past."

Here the Duchess shuddered as if with a glacial chill shooting through her, although it was the sultry month of July. Her pale countenance became paler; and her hand was instinctively placed upon her heart—for there was Bertram Vivian's ring concealed!

"Only a few words," said Captain Lacey quickly—for he saw this emotion and comprehended it. "You now belong to another: you are the bride of a nobleman whose honour is unimpeachable, as his rank is lofty and his wealth immense. I need scarcely tell you, Eliza, that he knows nothing of the past; and if you be wise—if you be prudent—if indeed you wish to be kind and considerate towards him, you will cherish *that* as your own secret——or rather forget that it ever was!"

"I cannot, father," said Eliza, in a low deep voice. "I cannot forget it! But, as you have observed, it is *my* secret—and it shall remain so. Let me relieve you of all apprehension on that head. I am now the Duke's wife: I comprehend all that is becoming on my part in my new position. I should feel honoured and flattered by his preference of me, did I possess a heart still capable of being moved by such feelings: but at least I shall be careful not to wound nor shock my husband by suffering him to know that I have loved another—that I cannot love *him*—that the power of loving a second time is dead within me!"

"Dearest daughter," exclaimed Captain Lacey, "I am delighted and distressed to hear you speak thus!—delighted to find that you so admirably appreciate the duties of your new position—distressed to think that the memory of the past is still so strong within you."

"Father," replied Eliza, earnestly, "distress not yourself on my account. It is done: I am resigned, if I be not contented. No—distress not yourself: but God grant that all possible happiness may be yours for the remainder of your days!"—and as she uttered these last words, tears trickled slowly down the pale cheeks of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Eliza, my darling!" said the old man, much moved; "let me see you exercise a becoming fortitude!"

"I am strong—and I am calm too again, father," responded the Duchess, wiping away her tears. "What other counsel have you to give me ere we separate?"

"Only a few words more," resumed Captain Lacey. "I might say much—I might tell you many things—but the time is too short now—the carriage is at the door—your ducal husband is waiting to bear away his beloved bride. And moreover," continued the old man, with an increase of that nervous excitement which his daughter mistook for sorrow at the approach of the parting moment, "it would arouse too many painful feelings—too many sad recollections. But yet, my darling daughter, there *are* a few words which must be spoken. You may perhaps shortly hear names mentioned in your presence, which will vividly recall that past to which I have alluded. You may discover too, that your marriage has given you connexions which——But no matter! It is only a single word of parting advice that I have time or fortitude enough to proffer; and that is to conjure you to be upon your guard, so that whatever you may hear shall not lead you to betray to your husband that you were at one time the betrothed of another."

"Father," replied the Duchess, with a glacial firmness of tone and a statue-like immoveability of features and of form, so that not a muscle of her countenance was stirred by affliction, nor the folds of her splendid scarf agitated by the bosom's heavings,—"you have seen with what fortitude I have passed through the ordeal of this day's ceremony: you have seen likewise that by my conduct I have never once given the Duke of Marchmont ground for the supposition that he is an object of the merest indifference to me. By all this let my future conduct be judged: by what I am, you may estimate what I shall be. Yes—I *am* firm. My destiny is fixed—and I accept it. Even if *he* whose image is dearer to me than I can express, were by a miracle to be brought back to life—were he suddenly to stand before me—I feel that I am nerved with the courage——it may be of despair—but nevertheless it *is* the courage that alone is adequate to support me even through such an ordeal as that. Now, father, are you satisfied?"

Singular and incomprehensible was for an instant the expression which flitted over the old man's features: the next moment it was succeeded by one of gladness, indubitable—unmistakable; and straining his daughter to his breast, he exclaimed, "I thank thee, beloved Eliza, for these assurances. Go, my darling: the moment is come for us to separate! Go: and may a father's blessing attend thee as a talisman to keep thy mind thus firm—thus nerved!"

The young Duchess was to a certain extent struck by her father's look, manner, and words, which appeared somewhat singular: but Mrs. Bailey entered at the moment to announce that the carriage was in readiness. She embraced her sire again—she embraced her relative also; and then issuing forth, found her husband ready to escort her to the magnificent equipage.

And now she was seated by that husband's side in the carriage with ducal arms emblazoned on the panels, symbolic of the almost princely rank to which that day she had been admitted as a partner. The four horses, guided and urged along by the two expert postilions, dashed through the streets; and in a short space London was left behind. Eliza,—while responding with that pensive sweetness which had become habitual to her, to the remarks which the Duke made,—revolved in her soul all the details of the parting counsel which her father had given to her; and it was not very long before her presence of mind and her fortitude were put to the test. For in the course of an affectionate and endearing speech, the Duke gave her to understand that they were on their way to the most splendid of his three country-seats—that it was situated in Hampshire—and that its name was Oaklands.

A glacial thrill shot through her like an electric shock at the mention of that name: but she was so completely on her guard, that her countenance betrayed naught of what was agitating within. In case however that it should, she looked from the window for a few moments, as if contemplating the scenery by which they were passing: but she gazed on vacancy. Oaklands!—that was the country-seat to which Bertram Vivian had repaired when he parted from her at Oxford; and it belonged to the family of which he himself was a scion. How, then, could it now be in the possession of the Duke her husband?

"We shall be there," continued his Grace, "completely by ourselves at first; and this seclusion, my beloved Eliza, I hope will not prove disagreeable or monotonous."

"Nothing, my lord," she answered, with her accustomed sweet amiability, "that is consistent with your will and pleasure, can be objectionable to me."

"Thanks, my sweet Eliza, for that response:"—and her husband pressed her hand to his lips. "In due time you will be introduced to the other members of the family—or rather they will be presented to you: and then we will have a gay company at Oaklands. Your father and Mrs. Bailey shall join us; and my own sweet Eliza shall do the honours of the house of which I am proud and happy to make her the mistress."

The Duchess gave a suitable response; and as the journey was continued, the discourse was continued also: but nothing more was said by the Duke to put his bride's fortitude and presence of mind to the test. Yet Oaklands—that name of Oaklands—kept agitating in her brain. She longed to ask her husband how it was that this estate had fallen into his possession—but she dared not; and as he said naught upon the subject, she supposed he either took it for granted that she was already informed thereon, or else that he considered it to be a matter of but little moment.

After a four hours' rapid drive, the Duke informed Eliza that they were now entering upon the estate; and in another half-hour an antique edifice, appearing above the embowering groves, broke upon the view. This was Oaklands. And she was about to set foot within those walls—to tread where Bertram had trodden—to sit where he had sat—to gaze upon objects which were familiar to him in his lifetime! As the equipage dashed along a noble sweep of carriage-way through a vast and superbly wooded park, she thought to herself that every tree which reared its stately head there, had been known to Bertram—that she was now passing amongst scenes where he also had passed—she was breathing as it were the very air which he had breathed. It was sufficient to resuscitate all the anguish of her affliction for his loss: it was enough to overpower her with irresistible emotions! But her soul was nerved with a preterhuman fortitude; and however much she might have felt internally, her pale countenance betrayed nothing of all this.

The equipage dashed up to the front of the splendid mansion; and troops of domestics came forth from the hall to welcome their ducal master and his lovely bride. She ascended to a chamber to change her dress; and perhaps if she had been alone, she might have given way to the pent-up feelings that were agitating in her soul. But she was attended by two maids; and she dared not betray any inordinate emotion in their presence.

Some days passed, during which nothing particular occurred that requires mention. In the meanwhile the Duchess had inspected all the apartments of the immense mansion; and though, by the sumptuous elegance of the fashionable dwellings she had seen in London, she was prepared for all the evidences of boundless wealth in her new home,—yet its splendour far eclipsed all her foreshadowings. One portion only remained unvisited; and this was the picture-gallery, which was under repair at the time of her arrival. Those repairs were finished; and one morning the Duke proposed that she should inspect the place,—which contained, as he stated, not only some paintings by eminent masters, but likewise the portraits of many of his oldest ancestors, as well as of his relatives who were more recently deceased. Thither they repaired. The paintings by the great masters occurred first in the gallery; and then came the portraits. Those of the Duke's elder ancestors engendered no particular sentiment beyond mere interest and curiosity: but when Eliza reached those of the relatives who were but recently deceased, strange thoughts and feelings began to take birth in her mind,—thoughts that seemed to be expanding into memories—feelings that appeared to connect the present with the past: and as she gazed with a growing wonderment, and even with consternation, the bewildering fancy which was at first dim, vague, and shapeless, strengthened into a conviction that there was in these portraits a pervasive family similitude from which a never-to-be-forgotten image was neither estranged nor disconnected. But the last portrait of all which hung in the array of successive family delineations——Eliza almost shrieked out as her eyes riveted their looks upon it! It represented a much older man than Bertram: but the resemblance between them was so striking, it seemed as if the original could have been none other than Bertram's father.

Strange suspicions and wild fancies swept through Eliza's mind; but all her agitation was concentrated within. The very tremor which thrilled through her, was one of the soul rather than of the body: outwardly she was calm and serene—or at least the Duke observed nothing strange nor unusual on the part of his wife. For a moment she averted her eyes from the portrait. She thought—she hoped, that what she fancied might be a delusion produced by the circumstance of *one* image being ever uppermost in her mind, and that therefore perhaps in her morbid imaginings she beheld that image to a certain degree reflected in the canvass before her. But as again she glanced along the array of the last half-dozen scions of her husband's family, or rather their representations there,—back to her mind came the conviction that it was no creation of the fancy, but that the pervasive resemblance *was* there,—commencing feebly with the scion most remote, strengthening visibly with each of those that followed, until settling into that unmistakable similitude of a paternal prototype. Therefore again were her eyes riveted upon this last; and all her acutest memories were painfully revived,—memories of the lost—the dead—the ever loved, the ever to be deplored!

"That," said the Duke, who still perceived nothing strange on the part of his wife, but merely attributed to a natural curiosity and interest the intentness with which her survey was fixed upon the last portrait of all those belonging to the family into which she had so recently entered,—"that one represents my younger brother, the late Lord Clandon, who died a little more than a year back. It was most unfortunate!—just after he had been raised to the Peerage, at the same time that my Marquisate was elevated to a Dukedom."

"And the title of your Marquisate, my lord?" said Eliza in a tone of inquiry; and though she stood still as a marble statue, ineffable feelings were agitating within.

"The title to which I succeeded by the death of an old uncle a little more than two years back," replied her husband, "was that of Viviandale. Shortly afterwards it was elevated to the Dukedom of Marchmont. That same death rendered my younger brother Lord Vivian—but a lord only by courtesy; and he was raised to the Peerage by the style and title of Baron Clandon."

"And previously to that death which first of all made him a lord by courtesy," said the Duchess, "I presume he was simply the Hon. Mr. Vivian? Forgive my ignorance on these subjects——"

And she stopped short. Not another word could she utter: more powerful still—indeed almost overwhelming, were the feelings that agitated in her soul.

"I am charmed, dearest, that you thus question me," responded the uxorious Duke; "and I am delighted to answer your questions. Yes—my younger brother was merely the Hon. Mr. Vivian until about two years back. But, as I was explaining to you just now, it is a little more than a year since he died suddenly. Ah, Eliza! there were cruel circumstances connected with his death. In a word, he received a very painful shock. It was the intelligence from America that his younger son—his best beloved—had perished—— Good heavens, Eliza dearest! are you ill?"

"No, my lord—no—it is nothing, I can assure you," said the Duchess quickly, as she instantaneously recovered her self-possession. "This place struck cold to me——"

"Yes, dearest—it *is* cold," said the uxorious Duke, though in reality the sultry sun of July was pouring its effulgence upon the entire glowing scene without. "The painters and gilders, the burnishers and decorators, as well as the picture-cleaners, have been here. But perhaps it is the odour of turpentine and paint which has even affected you more than the cold? Come—let us away. We will revisit the gallery on another occasion."

Eliza, pale as a marble statue, took her husband's arm, and accompanied him forth from the gallery. On the landing without, they encountered one of the footmen; and the Duke bade him express his displeasure to the steward for not having taken measures to rid the gallery of the disagreeable odour which filled it. He moreover ordered fires to be lighted there,—declaring that it was damp, and that what with the exhalation of the paint and the moist chill, her Grace had been rendered quite unwell. Eliza pleaded headache, and withdrew to her own boudoir—where she shut herself up to deliberate on all that had just passed.

A veil had fallen from her eyes. She now understood full well—*too* well—the meaning of those words of caution which her father had uttered in the last moments preceding their separation. She had married into the very family to which Bertram belonged: her husband was none other than the uncle of her lost loved one! That her father all along knew such to be the case, she could not possibly conceal from herself: but that the fact had been religiously concealed from her, both by her parent and Mrs. Bailey, was equally certain. That the Duke himself should never have spoken in a manner to make her aware of the circumstance, was not to be wondered at: for he had never talked to her about any of his relatives at all;—and this silence on his part she could now likewise understand. For a man of his years to take unto himself a young wife, was of course galling to that expectant kindred which had so much to gain by his dying childless. It would therefore have been a delicate topic for him to touch upon; and without any other motive had he avoided it: for he himself was utterly ignorant of bygone circumstances in respect to Eliza and Bertram—ignorant even that they had ever been acquainted. It was still farther apparent that in respect to the Vivian family, certain promotions in the aristocratic hierarchy had given loftier titles, accompanied by changes in their distinctive names; so that not for an instant could she have possibly suspected that the Marquis of Viviandale had been elevated into the ducal grandeur of Marchmont; and if by chance the name of Lord Clandon had ever fallen upon her ear, she would have had no possible clue to associate it with the family to which the lost Bertram had belonged. But now she comprehended it all; and again and again recurred the astounding thought that by a wondrous combination of circumstances she had entered the family which it was at one time the hope of her heart to enter—but that this entrance was effected, not as at that time she had so fondly anticipated—it was by her becoming the bride of the uncle, and not of the dearly cherished nephew, that the consummation was brought about!

Oh, how she had been sacrificed! But so strong was the filial feeling in the bosom of this excellent young lady—so completely was it interwoven in her very nature—that even in the depth of her own anguished feelings she sought excuses for her father. He had longed to behold her settled in life: it was, after all, natural that his ambition should covet this haughty alliance for his daughter: he had acted only with the conscientiousness of a parent; and if in so doing he had driven deeper down into her heart the dagger that was already planted there, it was with no studied intent to inflict additional pain. No rancour therefore might her gentle bosom harbour against him;—and to strengthen herself in the continuance of her filial love—to fortify also the extenuation which she conjured up for whatsoever duplicity or concealment there might have been in his recent conduct, she bethought herself of all the manifold sacrifices he had made for her in her girlhood. Yet amidst all these reflections, would come the sickening, blighting, blasting one that she had been rendered by circumstances doubly perfidious, as it were, to the memory of the lost but ever loved—that she had not merely become the wife of another, but *that other* a near relative of the cherished and deplored one. A vague sense of having committed even a crime—a dim undefined idea of having been thrown into a position which by its associations and connexions revolted against the natural purity of her thoughts—filled her soul with consternation and dismay. But it was done—her destiny was fixed—and she must bear her burden and resign herself to the lot in the best manner that she could. Above all, she must scrupulously continue to veil from her husband the sorrow which rested in the depths of her soul—that hidden sorrow which she would carry with her to the grave!

About six weeks passed away; and the portrait-gallery was *not* revisited. If ever the Duke started a proposition of the kind, Eliza was ready with a suggestion for some other recreative pursuit. There was this part of the estate still to visit, or there was that part which she should like to see again. In the same way too, when occasionally her husband seemed to be approaching the topic of his younger brother's death and the causes which led to it,—Eliza was equally ready with some observation to turn the discourse into quite another channel; and in order to do this effectually, she would assume a sudden liveliness, perfectly genuine in the estimation of the enraptured and uxorious Duke, but in reality fraught with the nervousness of a feverish excitement often bordering on the hysterical.

Thus the period of the honeymoon passed away, and one morning, at breakfast-time, the Duke of Marchmont said, "My dearest Eliza, we may now think of deviating somewhat from the routine which perhaps is becoming monotonous to you. We must have a little gaiety at Oaklands; and to tell you the truth, I had arranged what ought to have been a surprise for you—but I cannot keep the secret any longer. Your father and Mrs. Bailey will be here in the afternoon. Our friends, Sir William and Lady Lomax and their three daughters—who were present, you know, at the happy ceremony which made you mine—are likewise coming to pass a week with us. Tell me, dear Eliza—are you pleased with these arrangements?"

The Duke studied his utmost to render himself and all his plans agreeable to his young bride; and with her habitual amiability, she expressed her gratitude and her satisfaction.

"And there is another guest too, whom we may expect this evening in time for the dinner-hour," continued the Duke. "My nephew, Lord Clandon, who has just returned from a long Continental tour, has written to offer his congratulations on my marriage, and to express his earnest desire to pay his respects to my beautiful Duchess. The letter is altogether nicely and prettily worded—with a manly generosity and frankness too, for which," added the Duke almost involuntarily, and in a sort of musing strain, "I should scarcely have given Hugh credit. However," he went on hastily to observe, as if ashamed at having thus betrayed even the slightest fear as to the impression which his marriage might have made upon his nephew,—"I have answered him kindly, and invited him to visit us."

Again did the mention of that name of Clandon call up with painful vividness the memories of the past—those memories which were in reality never absent from Eliza's mind, but which unless thus stirred up, floated only with the sereneness of resignation, as a sort of perpetual under-current of the thoughts. Yet though thus strongly agitated within, her countenance betrayed nothing of what she felt.

In the course of the afternoon Mrs. Bailey's travelling-chariot dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands; and Eliza was clasped in the arms of her father. He mistook the filial enthusiasm of her embrace for an evidence of complete satisfaction and happiness on account of the alliance which she had formed; and whatsoever apprehensions had previously filled his mind on that score, were dissipated in a moment. But when Eliza came to regard Captain Lacey attentively, she perceived that he was looking exceedingly ill—and that the smiles which her presence and his own relieved thoughts conjured up, beamed upon a countenance that was thin, haggard, and care-worn. She comprehended all that he must have felt on her account—his deep anxiety lest his parting injunctions should have been disregarded, and that she might have betrayed the past when made aware of the family into which she had married. Pained by his appearance, she lavished upon him the most tender caresses; and the old man's happiness now appeared as complete as the pride of his ambition had already been. As for Mrs. Bailey, it was a proud thing for her to be enabled to salute a Duchess as her relative; so that in the increased consequence and importance which it gave her, she found infinite reason for self-congratulation at having taken the Captain and his daughter by the hand in the moment of their need.

A little later in the afternoon Sir William and Lady Lomax, with their three daughters, arrived; and as the dinner-hour drew near, several other guests—dwellers in the neighbourhood of Oaklands—were introduced. But still there was one to arrive whose appearance Eliza deeply dreaded. This was Lord Clandon. When at Oxford, she had never seen Hugh: she was likewise aware that Bertram had never breathed to his brother a syllable of their love; and it was not therefore through fear that *this* would be betrayed to the Duke, that the Duchess dreaded to encounter Lord Clandon. But she thought to herself that if Lord Clandon bore a resemblance to the lost Bertram, her presence of mind would be put to the sorest, severest test it had as yet experienced, and she would have to pass through an ordeal fraught with anguish and mental agony to which the tortures of the rack were paradise in comparison. But the dinner-hour came—and Lord Clandon made not his appearance. After waiting some time, the Duke decided that the banquet should be served up. It was so—the ladies in due course adjourned to the drawing-room—where in another hour they were joined by the gentlemen. It was now past nine o'clock; and Eliza was just congratulating herself that the dreaded meeting would be postponed until the following day,—when the sounds of an equipage dashing up to the front of the mansion, reached her ears. Now she summoned all her fortitude to her aid—all her presence of mind. Sir William Lomax — a tall, thin, aristocratic-looking man, far advanced in years—was conversing with her at the time; and this perhaps was fortunate for her,—inasmuch as if younger and more penetrating eyes had been fixed upon her countenance, the evidences of a strong inward trouble might have been read. The drawing-room door was thrown open; and a domestic announced in a loud voice, "Lord Clandon."

The Duke greeted his nephew warmly; and there was something in his cordial clasp of the hand which seemed to convey a heartfelt gratitude for the generous, frank, and magnanimous manner in which Hugh had expressed himself with regard to a marriage which he had in reality so little reason to like. For Lord Clandon, in default of issue, was the heir to the estates and title of Marchmont; and this alliance on the part of his uncle with a young wife only just twenty-one years of age, naturally gave every promise that Hugh's hopes and expectations would be disappointed.

"Welcome, my dear nephew, to Oaklands," said the Duke. "And now permit me at once to present you to one to whom you are anxious to become known."

Eliza had not dared fling even a single glance towards the door when it opened. She rose from her seat, and stood motionless,—a wild excitement in her mind, but with all the outward appearance of the unstudied grace of a serene and dignified self-possession. There was confusion in her brain—a veil before her eyes: Sir William Lomax was saying something to her—she knew not what it was. His voice and the voices of all the others in the room, seemed like an unintelligible blending of humming, droning sounds. She heard persons approaching her: then her husband's voice said, "Eliza, I have pleasure in introducing my nephew, Lord Clandon."

All in an instant she became vividly, frightfully, terribly aware of the necessity of exerting her fortitude to the utmost. And it came, like a wondrous inspiration. She raised her eyes: she beheld before her a fine, tall, handsome man—really not more than a few months past four-and-twenty, though looking three or four years older. His hair was of jetty darkness, and wanted the rich gloss and the silky fineness to make it resemble that of the lost Bertram. His features, somewhat largely chiselled, were haughtily handsome, yet with the traces of either fatigue or dissipation in his lineaments. But altogether there was a sufficiency—more than a sufficiency of a family likeness to bring back the image of Bertram most vividly to her mind—even if at the moment any such impulse should have been wanting at all. Nevertheless, Eliza's self-possession remained: the astonishment which she experienced at her own fortitude, amounted almost to a feeling of gladness; and thus was it with a smile and with all her habitual sweetness of manner, that she gave Hugh her hand, welcoming him to Oaklands.

Lord Clandon's demeanour was alike respectful and friendly—or it might be termed delicately courteous—towards her whom, though three years younger than himself, marriage had made his aunt. The Duke and Sir William Lomax remained chatting with them for a few minutes; and then the former, taking the Baronet's arm, sauntered away to another part of the room, for the purpose of leaving his wife and nephew to get over the first restraints and awkwardness of an introduction and become better acquainted with each other. Eliza resumed her seat: Lord Clandon, with fashionable ease, sank upon a chair near her, and at once began to converse on the current topics of the day. He spoke of the Italian Opera—of the last new novel—of a drama which had made "a great hit"—and of two or three approaching "marriages in high life." Then he spoke of his travels in foreign parts; and he related several adventures which had befallen him—but in a pleasing manner, and without any offensive egotism. He was evidently a man of the world—well accustomed to all the usages of the sphere in which he moved; and by his discourse, the impression was conveyed that he had a great deal of frankness and high-mindedness in his disposition. Such was the opinion Eliza formed of him; and indeed it was all the more natural she should do so—not merely because there was no appearance on his part of a studied straining to make that impression—but likewise because he spoke in the kindest and most dutiful terms of his uncle,—at the same time treating the Duchess herself with a courtesy which had all the friendliness proper to subsist between relatives, and all the respect which so young a man was bound in delicacy to show towards the still more youthful bride of an elderly relation.

Presently Lord Clandon was introduced to Captain Lacey; and when the latter, after some little conversation, had retired to the card-room, to form one at a rubber of whist,—Lord Clandon said to Eliza, "Is it possible that you ever resided at Oxford?"

The Duchess had for the previous half-hour been prepared for some such question as this; and it was therefore without any visible trepidation that she replied in the affirmative. But she said no more; and no inquiring look was thrown upon Hugh, to seek the motive of the question.

"It struck me," continued Lord Clandon, "when I read the account of your marriage in the newspaper—I was then in Paris, by the bye—that the name of Captain Lacey, who was mentioned as your Grace's father, was not altogether unfamiliar to me; and the moment your venerable parent was just now introduced to me, I felt persuaded I had seen him before. Yes—I recollect—he was once pointed out to me at Oxford——But perhaps your Grace is unaware that I myself passed a couple of years in that city? Indeed, I am afraid," he added with a smile, "that we collegians were not considered steady enough for reception into private families."

Eliza slowly turned her looks upon Lord Clandon to assure herself whether there was any hidden meaning in his remark—any pointed allusion to the *one* exception which had been made in favour of his brother Bertram with regard to a reception at Captain Lacey's house at Oxford: but she was convinced that he intended nothing, and that it was merely in a conversational manner he had thus spoken.

"Yes," said Eliza, in answer to a question which he had put: "I was aware that you were at Oxford."

"It is somewhat singular," Hugh went on to observe, "that we should have been in the same town a comparatively short while back, yet such total strangers to each other—and now that we should meet—for me," he added, with a smile and a gentle inclination of the head, "to have the honour of addressing your Grace as a relation. Let me see? it was two years last June since I and my brother Bertram left Oxford. I can assure you I was by no means sorry: I was getting heartily tired of the same kind of life, though it was all pleasure. But then pleasures pall upon the senses," he added, with the languid tone and the jaded look of a man who had drunk to satiety of that cup of pleasure whereof he spoke. "As for Bertram, I don't know how it was, but he was wretched to a degree at leaving College. Perhaps he was not quite so wild as I was, and had rather a fancy for his studies. Don't think the worse of me because I now confess that little wildness on my part. When it is gone and past, one may talk of it. Bertram was more sentimental and serious than I——"

At this moment the Duchess dropped her handkerchief, which Lord Clandon hastened to pick up for her. It had fallen from her hand, as a faintness coming over her, made her fair fingers relax their hold upon it. Within the last few minutes the name of Bertram had been mentioned half-a-dozen times in her hearing: it would have been sufficient for this mere mention to agitate her profoundly; but when she heard the name—that sacred, loved, lamented name—thrown forth from the lips with what appeared to be the mingled levity and callousness of one who, although his brother, could yet speak of him as if the recollection of his loss were unaccompanied with a single regret, it was sufficient to overwhelm all Eliza's fortitude in a moment and make her sink down beneath the influence of her excruciated feelings. Again however did a species of preterhuman self-possession come to her aid: the little incident of the handkerchief startled her into a vivid consciousness of the peculiarities and perils of her position—and her countenance was serene once more.

Lord Clandon was already continuing the same topic, when Sir William Lomax advanced with his wonted stiff stateliness of manner, and with his eyes half closed; for he thought that this appearance gave him an air of intellectual consequence;—and joining in the conversation, he turned it upon another topic. But all of a sudden the door opened somewhat hastily,—hastily enough to startle the inmates of the room, and to stop the music which a piano was sending forth beneath the fingers of a young lady. It was Mrs. Bailey who made her appearance; and hastening up to the Duchess, with a look of ill-subdued agitation, she said, "Do not be frightened—pray do not be frightened! We hope it is nothing: but your Grace's father——"

"My father?" echoed Eliza, starting up to her feet in sudden terror.

"Pray do not be frightened! It is but a slight fit—and fortunately Dr. Rodney being one of the guests——"

The Duchess waited to hear no more: she rushed wildly from the room, and in a few moments knew the worst. Captain Lacey, while seated at the card-table, had been stricken down by paralysis, which had deprived him of consciousness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONTENTS OF THE DESK.

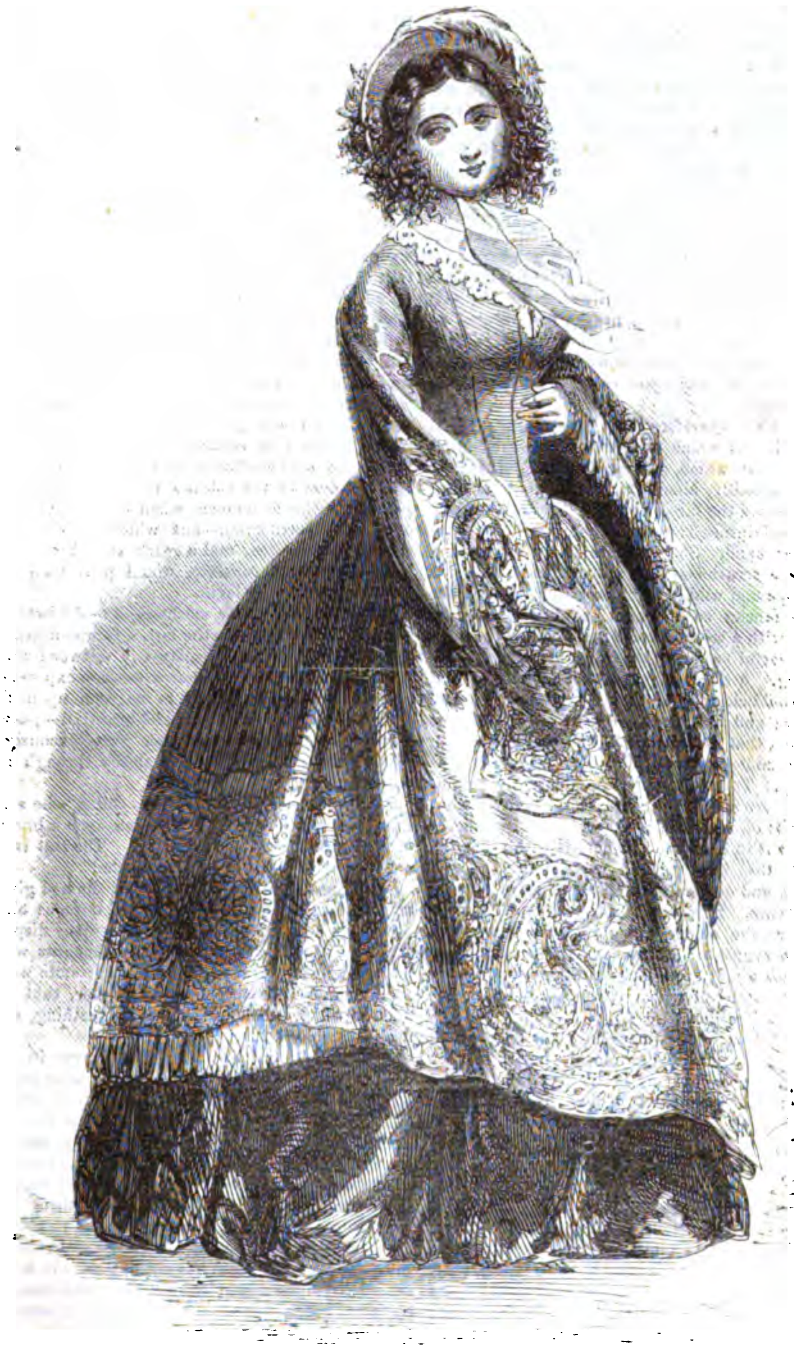
How uncertain are the affairs of this life! The mutations from weal to woe are as often of lightning rapidity as of gradual stealthy movement; and swift as the changes of the magic lantern, may the scene shift from the brilliantly-lighted saloon where music fills the perfumed atmosphere, to the chamber of death where the sounds of weeping prevail. Thus was it at the ducal mansion of Oaklands. At the very instant that soft melody was flowing upon the ears in one apartment, and cards were being played in another,—the sable wing of the Destroyer was unfolding itself above that high antique roof: the music was to cease suddenly in consternation—the victim's last card was played!

It was long past the hour of midnight. Captain Lacey was stretched in a sumptuous couch, plunged in that last sleep which paralysis often brings, and from which there is to be no awaking in this world. Eliza knelt by the side of that couch, with her father's hand pressed to her lips. She was weeping—not loudly and bitterly—but in that low continuous manner which perhaps indicates a deeper and more concentrated anguish of the soul. The Duke stood near her; and frequently did he bend down to whisper a few lowly-uttered but tender and earnest words in her ear, imparting such solace as in existing circumstances could be given. Dr. Rodney was near the head of the bed, watching with an ominous countenance the evidences of the soul's approaching transition from its mortal tenement into the regions of immortality. The old housekeeper—summoned to officiate as a nurse, though the patient was indeed well nigh beyond all human ministrations—was likewise there. Every possible assistance had been rendered—every available means adopted to grapple with the Destroyer's power—but vainly and ineffectually: Eliza's father was on his death-bed. As the gray dawn of morning glimmered in through the casements and made the wax-lights burn pale, the spirit passed out of the form which for several hours had remained in slumbering unconsciousness.

The Duke led his deeply afflicted wife away from the chamber, and besought her to seek rest in her own boudoir. Even in the midst of her acute anguish—her profound sorrow—she could not help being smitten with a sense of her husband's considerate kindness towards her; and for the first time perhaps since the marriage ring was placed upon her finger, she pressed his hand with a sincerely felt warmth. We will not linger upon this scene. The reader who already comprehends the tenderness of Eliza's heart, and the full extent of her devoted attachment towards her father, can picture to himself the immensity of the sorrow which her soul experienced. The funeral took place; and the remains of Captain Lacey were consigned to a vault in the village church of Oaklands, about a mile distant from the ducal mansion. Thus how soon did the gloom of a funeral succeed to the gaiety of a wedding! how soon did mourning garments clothe the exquisitely fair form which had lately been arrayed in a bridal dress!

Captain Lacey had brought his writing-desk in his portmanteau to Oaklands. The Duke, through kindest consideration for his beloved Duchess, caused every article belonging to her deceased father to be carefully put out of sight—save and except that writing-desk, which he thought might possibly contain papers—perhaps a will: for his Grace was not altogether acquainted with his departed father-in-law's pecuniary circumstances. At all events he considered that whatever there might be in the desk, it was the sacred duty of Eliza *alone* to open it. Therefore, at the expiration of about a month after the funeral—when the first bitterness of anguish had passed, and the mind of the bereaved daughter was becoming subdued down into the serenity of a holy and pious resignation—the Duke one day took that desk into her boudoir, presented her with the key, which had been found in the deceased's garments, and imprinting a kiss upon her cheek, left her to the fulfilment of a sad but necessary task. Eliza recognised her father's desk in a moment; and again in the conduct of her husband did she perceive much delicate consideration, which her heart—though it could not love—was yet enabled to appreciate. The sight of that desk brought tears to her eyes; and thus weeping before she opened it, she was in a measure relieved, as well as strengthened to address herself to that duty.

She opened the desk. The first paper she took out, was a tress of her mother's hair—that mother who had died in giving her birth, and whom she had never known. She pressed it to her lips: again she wept—and wiping away her tears, proceeded with her task. The next paper she drew forth, was addressed to Captain Lacey, in the well-known hand of Bertram; and she knew the letter likewise. It was the one which he had written from Oaklands, bowing to the decision of Eliza's father that two years were to elapse ere their cor-



ELIZA, DUCHESS OF MARCHMONT.

respondence should be renewed. She had never seen this letter since the day it arrived—she had never read it but once; yet she now recognised it in a moment—and every line of its contents was imprinted on her memory as if seared there with red hot iron. Her first impulse was to open and read it again—but she checked herself: the very thought struck her as being an infidelity to her husband. She could not prevent herself from thinking of Bertram—she could not prevent her mind from clinging with a soft, sad, serene affection to his image: she had no power over her own volition. But on the other hand, she felt that she had no right to do a positive deed which might resuscitate all the frenzy of her regrets for his loss: she had no right to voluntarily seek for the evidences of that love which heaven had refused to crown with happiness. Therefore, under the influence of this most scrupulous delicacy, Eliza put the letter aside; and again cast her looks into the writing-desk.

But, Ah! wherefore does she start? What writing is this which next meets her eye? what letter is that which, addressed to her father, she eagerly, greedily, almost frantically snatches up? She examines the direction—she looks at the post-marks—a faintness comes over her: the letter drops from her hand. She snatches it up again: and again she scrutinizes the post-marks. Thoughts of strange and wild contexture sweep through her mind,—fancies so poignant, so bewildering, so fraught with a solemn wonderment and at the same time a fearful suspense, that they are almost overpowering. A single glance at the interior of that letter would clear up all doubt—relieve her of all suspense: and she knows—she feels—she has the conviction that it will do so: but there is within her a shuddering awful horror to arrive at that certainty. Thoughts so wild—apparently so impossible—are agitating in her brain; and yet what she thinks of, *is* possible—for the proof is there: she holds it in her hand! There is within her the certainty that it is so; and yet she flutters, and trembles, and quivers with all the doubt of agonising suspense. This state is intolerable. She opens the letter—she reads—but only a few words, and for a few moments; and she sinks down upon her knees with a low, deep, long-drawn, gasping moan, the full meaning of which it would be almost impossible to describe.

Her head is bowed upon the chair from which she has sunk down: her face is buried in her hands—and that boudoir is silent as the grave: not even the pulsations of her heart nor the respirations of her breath are audible. She is motionless as the sculptured effigy of Despair kneeling by a monument of a loved and lost one. Yet it is not that she is in a state of unconsciousness. No: her sense remains—but experienced only as a stunned, dismayed consternation. There is something awful—something profoundly solemn —in the mental condition of that kneeling lady. She weeps not—her bosom is not convulsed: there is not a tremor thrilling through her form—not even the slightest creeping agitation to give sign of life. Yet she lives: but her's are unutterable, ineffable feelings.

Minutes elapse while she thus remains kneeling by the chair, her face buried in her hands. At length slowly—Oh! so slowly, she rises up like a ghost ascending from the tomb; and as a ghost she is marble pale. If she caught the reflection of her own image in the mirror opposite, she would start in dismay: she would not believe, in the first shock, that it was herself she beheld imaged there. But she has no outward vision for anything: her eyes behold nothing in the room. All her thoughts—all her senses—all her faculties, are absorbed in *one* idea which lies at the bottom of her soul.

Again several minutes elapse; and then with a slow mechanical movement, as if unconscious of the very impulse which she is obeying, Eliza stoops down and picks up the letter which has fallen from her hand—that letter which has produced all which we have just been describing. And now she sits down, and reads it calmly and deliberately. Oh, with what a calmness! It is the calmness which the ocean of hyperborean regions displays when frozen into solid ice,—the calmness of that glacial spell which can alone tranquillize the mighty waters that if the talismanic power were removed, would boil and rage in all the wild ebullition of the tempest. It is the calmness of the volcano that sleeps under a power superior to its own, when its lava is hardened into petrifaction—but which, if the spell should be removed, and a spark should be set to the inflammable concrete, would pour forth the gush of the burning levin.

Eliza read the letter mechanically—deliberately —from the first word to the last. It was finished; and then only did she display any outward emotion: then only was it that a strange expression —a sad expression indeed to be seen upon the countenance of one so young and beautiful—passed slowly over her features, while simultaneously a glacial tremor trailed itself as slowly through her entire form.

"I thank thee, O God, for one thing," she said, in a voice which seemed as if borne upon a breath of ice,—"and only for *one* thing. The rest is all dark—horrible—frightful—incredible!"

It did not seem to strike her that she had given utterance to something savouring of impious blasphemy, in accepting only *one* of the many dispensations of Providence on which her thoughts were evidently fixed. But she was in that state when the human soul is so chilled by despair, that the form to which it belongs is but a breathing, animated marble statue.

She looked over the remaining papers in the desk: there was another letter, in the same handwriting—of a recent date—a *very* recent date—and this also Eliza read. Again were her feelings excited poignantly—horribly—agonisingly; and for some minutes she was convulsed with the tortures of anguish, while the tears rained down her cheeks. She wrung her hands too—yes, wrung them bitterly, bitterly;—and it was long ere she recovered even the calmness of despair. Then she again looked into the desk: but there was nothing more to interest her. Impossible indeed would it have been for any other paper to produce a state of being more deplorable—more deserving the whole world's commiseration—than those which had already placed a petrifying spell upon the heart of the unhappy Duchess of Marchmont. She locked up all the papers in the desk again; and the desk itself she secured in a bureau of which she kept the key. For the remainder of that day she stayed in her boudoir, —sending a message by one of her maids to her husband, to the effect that she begged his kind consideration and wished to be alone. The Duke naturally fancied—as indeed was but too terribly the case—that his wife had found in the contents of the desk something to make her thus court solitude; and he obtruded not his presence upon her. But on the following morning, when she descended to the breakfast-parlour, she expressed her gratitude for all his goodness towards her; and when he saw how pale she was, he thought to himself that the documents she had found in the desk, must have revived all her bitterest affliction at her father's loss. He however delicately and carefully abstained from breathing a word in allusion to the subject—much less to inquire what the contents of those papers might have been. From that day forth the sadness deepened upon Eliza's countenance—but also blended with a sweeter and holier resignation: her tones acquired that soft plaintiveness of harmony which characterises the voice that is accustomed to keep down an ebullition of feeling: her cheeks remained pale—but not with a sickly whiteness: it was the perfect transparency of the complexion which loses not its animation when the tint of the rose dies away.

We should observe that Lord Clandon had left Oaklands almost immediately after Captain Lacey's funeral—as did also Mrs. Bailey: the other guests who had been invited to stay there, had for delicacy's sake taken their leave on the very morning after the demise of the Duchess's father. The Duke of Marchmont,—thinking that change of scene would contribute to the restoration of his wife's spirits, and that a southern clime during the approaching winter would benefit her health, —proposed a visit to Italy. Eliza, ever amiably ready to yield to her husband's wishes in all things, gave her assent in that calmly serene manner, tinged with sadness, which had now become habitual to her:—and to Italy they accordingly went.

The winter passed: spring revisited the earth, clothing the trees with a tender verdure, and covering the boughs with blossoms. Summer followed, to expand that verdure into a more brilliant green, and to prepare the boughs for the rich fruitage of autumn. It was in the beginning of September, 1829—exactly one year from the death of Captain Lacey — that the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont returned to Oaklands. The Duke had some reason to flatter himself that his hopes, when they set out upon their travels, had not been altogether unfulfilled. It was not that the colour had come back to Eliza's cheeks —*that* appeared to have gone for ever: but as there was naught of insipid deadness in the purity of her complexion, her beauty was not marred — only rendered the more interesting. There are some forms which remain uninfluenced by the sorrow which lies deep in the heart: it is ever so when that sorrow exists always the same, —breaking not forth in sudden and violent ebullitions, to be succeeded by periods of exhaustion. These cause the wear and tear of the frame: but it is the former state which shows itself but little outwardly;—and so it was with the Duchess of Marchmont. Her figure retained all its rounded contours, its rich proportions, its flowing outlines: splendour, elegance, and grace, blended with a touching interest as well as with a becoming dignity, rendered her a being of whom any husband might be proud. And the Duke of Marchmont was proud of his Eliza: he had seen her as much admired in Italy as she had been in England; and he now hoped that as England was reached again, she would mingle in the society which her rank and loveliness qualified her to adorn, and where she would shine as a star of matchless and sweetest beauty.

The Duke of Marchmont's arrangements were that they should remain at Oaklands throughout the autumn, until the Christmas season,—when they would remove to the town-mansion. His Grace was accustomed to submit to his wife's approval whatsoever he projected: for to *her* only was he neither proud nor autocratic;—and she on her side invariably gave her sweetly and softly expressed assent to all his proposals. But in order that the stay at Oaklands might not be dull nor monotonous,—and in order that Eliza might again gradually glide into the gaieties of society, after a year of mourning for her father,—the Duke suggested that they should entertain a select circle of friends. Accordingly invitations were sent to Mrs. Bailey, to the Lomax family, and to half-a-dozen other members, male and female, of the fashionable world. They came in due course; and though Eliza received them with her wonted affability, and did the honours of the mansion with a becoming grace and dignity, she experienced no real relief in their society from any of the sorrows that lay deep in the immortal caverns of her heart.

Lord Clandon was at his shooting-box in a midland county, when the Duke and Duchess returned to England. On learning their arrival, he lost no time in writing a dutiful and affectionate letter to his uncle, expressing a hope that the amiable Duchess had recovered so far as could be expected from the shock of her father's death. The Duke, flattered and gratified by this fresh testimonial of Hugh's complete and generous deference to the head of the family, responded in cordial terms, and invited him to pay a visit to Oaklands. Lord Clandon was unmarried; and the Duke jocosely hinted in his letter that it was high time Hugh should think of taking unto himself a partner for life—and that probably amongst the lady-guests assembled at Oaklands, he might find one who in personal and pecuniary points of view would prove an eligible match. The pecuniary point of view was perhaps the more important for Lord Clandon's consideration, inasmuch as he was far from rich: his income amounted to a bare two thousand a-year—little enough to support his position as a Peer—and a mere trifle indeed for one whose habits were expensive and extravagant. The Duke well knew that his nephew was thus straitened in his means; and in the same letter which conveyed the invitation to Oaklands, he enclosed a cheque upon his banker for a handsome amount. Lord Clandon hastened to acknowledge the epistle and its enclosure,—expressing a fervid gratitude for his uncle's considerate kindness, and promising to be at Oaklands at the expiration of a week.

The same post which brought this letter from Hugh, brought one from *another* quarter—likewise addressed to the Duke. To this second letter a kind response was likewise returned by his Grace,—accompanied by an invitation to Oaklands. And Eliza knew that this letter was received—and that this invitation was given. The answer came, to the effect that the writer would be at Oaklands in the afternoon of the following day.

That afternoon came. The Duke and his wife were alone together in the drawing-room: for it so happened that all the guests were out riding or walking in the grounds, enjoying the beauty of that autumnal season. A very close observer—if such a one had been present—might have noticed that the cheeks of the Duchess were paler than even their wont,—paler because that animation of the complexion which had survived the fading of the natural carnation tint, was temporarily deadened into a complete whiteness. And such an observer, too, would perchance have seen that there was a strange light in the large dark eyes. The Duke however perceived not all this: for Eliza seemed busily occupied in the contemplation of a number of magnificent prints which one of the guests had brought from London a day or two previously. The Duke was standing in one of the bay-windows of the drawing-room, which commanded a view of the carriage-road; for he was in expectation of the promised arrival.

It was about four o'clock on this particular afternoon, that a post-chaise dashed up to the grand entrance of Oaklands; and the Duke exclaimed, "Here he is! More than three years have elapsed since last I saw him."

Eliza remained occupied with the prints—but turning them over more rapidly than at first. The Duke went on making observations relative to the individual who had just arrived—but it scarcely seemed as if the Duchess heard them: for she gave no response. In a few minutes footsteps were heard approaching the door: that door was thrown open—and a domestic announced, "The Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian."

CHAPTER V.

BERTRAM VIVIAN.

ELIZA rose from her seat; and the Duke took her hand to present her to her relative,—that relative whom he fancied she had never in her life seen before—but alas! whom she had known so well and loved so tenderly. She was white as a sheet; and her death-like pallor was rendered all the more visible by the half-mourning garb that she wore. Her raven hair, arranged in massive bands, threw out as it were the colourless countenance in its purest marble relief: her lips were of the hue of ashes: but there was a strange light glistening in her eyes, as she bowed to Bertram Vivian. Then there was a quick revulsion of feeling within her,—pangs of ineffable anguish shooting in rapid succession through her heart; and while her fortitude was sufficient to prevent any outburst of that woe—any ebullition of that harrowing agony—it had the effect on the other hand of sending up the hectic hues of excitement to her cheeks; so that her husband, as he glanced with proud satisfaction upon his young wife, while introducing her to Bertram, thought that she had never seemed so beautiful before.

And Bertram Vivian himself—how looked, how felt he? He was now in his twenty-fourth year—a young man of Apollo-like beauty. His hair clustered in raven curls of exceeding richness about that high marble forehead where Genius sat enthroned: his tall slender figure was masculine symmetry itself. But he too was deadly pale: yet to the Duke's eye was no agitation on his part visible. But how different to the eyes of Eliza! The glance—the one glance—which she had dared throw upon him, made her aware in an instant that he was a prey to a deep, silent, inward agitation, as tremendous and as excruciating as that which she felt herself: and she saw too that notwithstanding his air of outward composure, there was something about him almost bordering upon terror which her eye alone could detect. Doubtless he feared lest all in a moment the adamantine bonds of tensely nerved prudence and preterhuman self-control wherewith he and she had fortified themselves, should be snapped asunder, as Samson broke the Philistine bonds—and that there might ensue a wild scene of agony, flooding tears, and convulsive sobs, in which they would both be lost. But when Bertram beheld her so completely the mistress of herself, that feeling of terror passed away in an instant; and with a coldly courteous dignity, he returned her salutation.

"Bertram, my dear nephew," exclaimed the Duke, hastening to embrace him; "welcome to Oaklands! Welcome—doubly welcome—all the more that I have not seen you since that shocking but false report of your loss——But, Eliza dearest, you must at least give my younger nephew as kind a greeting as you bestowed upon the elder one when first you met a year back."

For the Duke remembered that when Eliza and Lord Clandon had thus met, she graciously proffered him her hand, giving him at the same time words of welcome. But now to Bertram no hand was stretched forth—no syllable was spoken.

"Welcome to Oaklands, Mr. Vivian," said Eliza, in a voice which *he* knew to be unnaturally calm, but which struck the Duke as only being strangely and unaccountably chilling: at the same time she proffered her hand, which Bertram just held for a moment.

Again had a revulsion of feeling taken place within her: she was again all marble—and it was a hand cold as that of the dead which Bertram thus touched.

"And so, my dear nephew," said the Duke, "you only returned from St. Petersburgh a few days back? By the bye, how was it that when you came from the United States last June twelvemonth, you did not take London in your way to see your relatives and your friends, ere proceeding to St. Petersburgh?"

"You are aware, uncle," responded Bertram, "that when I obtained leave of absence from my post in America, it *was* my purpose to pass a few months in England. But on arriving at Liverpool I received an official despatch, announcing that I was appointed First Attaché to the Embassy at St. Petersburgh; and the positive orders were that I was to proceed thither without a moment's delay. I did so."

"Well, well," said the Duke, "there is nothing like zeal and obedience in the performance of your duties. The Foreign Office is much pleased with you; and I shall ask that you be appointed Envoy to one of the minor Courts. It is a proud thing for you, Bertram, to reflect that when only a few months past your twenty-third year, you will be an Ambassador! Or if you like to go to Parliament, I can put you in for one of my pocket-boroughs at the next general election."

"My lord, I would much rather leave England again as soon as possible."

"Well, we shall have plenty of time to talk it over: for I mean you to stay a few weeks with us, now that you are here. Your brother, Lord Clandon, is expected in a few days; and we have a select party at Oaklands."

"I should now wish to retire to my chamber," said Bertram. "The roads are dusty——"

"To be sure!" cried the Duke: and ringing the bell, he ordered the domestic who answered the summons, to show the Hon. Mr. Vivian to his apartment.

"And it is time," said Eliza, after a pause, during which Bertram with a slight bow had quitted the room,—"it is time that I should dress for dinner."

In a few minutes the Duchess was alone in her boudoir. This meeting with the loved one—the one who was still so dear to her—had been almost more than her fortitude could bear up against. Throughout the ordeal she herself was astounded at her own courage in supporting it: but now that she was alone in her boudoir, her feelings could no longer be restrained. She threw herself upon her knees—her anguish burst forth—the tears gushed in fountains from her eyes—her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"O father, father!" the voice of ineffable agony went up from her heart, as she thus apostrophized her dead parent: "you know not the misery you were entailing upon me at the time! But if from the mansions of the other world it be given to the spirits of the departed to look down at what is passing in this, you can now understand it all! May God forgive you, father——even as I have forgiven you!"

When she grew somewhat calmer, the Duchess of Marchmont reviewed the details of the meeting which had just passed. While Bertram was answering his uncle's observations, he had spoken with a cold firmness, and without even so much as glancing towards herself: but when he had said that he was anxious to leave England as soon as possible, he had spoken with an emphasis which she could full well understand. Oh, why had he come to Oaklands at all? wherefore cause them both to run this tremendous risk? Did he suppose that the Duke was acquainted with the circumstance of their love? No—it was impossible: for if so, Bertram would not have paid this visit. The natural delicacy of his feelings would have kept him away:—but how was it that his pride had not also kept him away? Did he suspect how she had been deceived and sacrificed? or did he fancy that she had wilfully proved faithless to her love for him, and dazzled by the proffer of a ducal coronet, had bestowed her hand upon his uncle? In all these matters Eliza was in a state of the utmost uncertainty. But could her doubts be cleared up? must she seek or afford an opportunity for explanations? No—she was resolved not to trust herself alone with Bertram Vivian. Rather—ten thousand times rather, exist even under the weight of *his* injurious suspicions, if such he entertained,—than do aught which might savour of impropriety in her position as a wife, or lead her to even an unfaithful thought or unduteous word with regard to her husband. And that he *did* entertain those suspicions, she was more than half afraid: for there was a certain pride—a certain cold assertion of manly dignity, in the way in which he had met her. Why then had he come to Oaklands?—was it to upbraid and reproach her? was it to demand the return of the ring which he had given her, and to restore the one which he had received from herself?

The Duchess of Marchmont saw more than ever the necessity of exerting all her fortitude. She did her best to assume her wonted outward calmness; and she bathed her eyes copiously to efface the evidences of weeping ere she summoned her maids to assist at her toilet. When this toilet was completed, she repaired to the drawing-room, where she found the Duke in conversation with the assembled guests: but Bertram was not there. It was not until within a few minutes of the dinner-hour, that he made his appearance. How handsome did he look!—but not finely and majestically handsome—it was rather a delicate and intellectual but still masculine beauty which characterized him. There was no colour upon his cheeks; and his glossy dark whiskers threw out the paleness of those cheeks all the more visibly. But the exquisite classic profile—the haughty curl of the upper lip—and the god-like nobility of the alabaster brow, with the raven curls clustering around it,—rendered that head a model of sculptural perfection. His movements were slow, yet not sluggish: they were replete with ease and elegance: but they, as well as the expression of his countenance, indicated to observers generally the thoughtfulness of his mind—and to Eliza *alone* the existence of a deep, ineffable, imperishable sorrow in his heart. His voice was, as it were, clouded from the same cause—but full of a fine masculine harmony; and when, as he glided with ease into the discourse that was progressing as he entered, a smile appeared upon his lips, it was a cold glacial smile, resembling the light which the sun flings upon ice.

When dinner was announced, it became Bertram's duty,—as the last male comer, and likewise as a relative—to escort the Duchess to the banqueting-room. It was only with a cold courtesy that he approached her: with the same cold reserve did she bow slightly as she took his arm: but not with more airy lightness sits the butterfly upon the flower, than lay the fingers of Eliza upon the arm of Bertram Vivian. As they headed the procession to the banqueting-room, Bertram spoke of the weather, of the beauty of the grounds, and of the most indifferent topics. It was the same as he sat on her right hand at the dinner-table; and when he took wine with her, the bows that were exchanged were the merest and the slightest inclination of the head, without a smile upon either countenance. All was chilling and distant between them. Thus the dinner passed away; and every one, not even excepting the Duke himself, had noticed that there was a strange forma- [illegible] illing ceremonial distance, with merely of well-bred courtesy over all—between the Duchess and Bertram Vivian. But of course no remark was verbally made; though covert and stealthy looks of surprise were exchanged. The natural impression was that Bertram—less generous, less magnanimous than his elder brother—looked with ill-disguised discontent and annoyance on the marriage which his uncle had contracted; and that the Duchess, perceiving this conduct on his part, resented it in a dignified and becoming manner.

When the ladies had retired, the Duke—not wishing to judge his nephew hastily, but at the same time feeling it incumbent upon him to take some little notice, if only by barest allusion, of a tenour of conduct which every one had perceived—motioned him to bring his glass and come and sit next to him. Bertram obeyed with an alacrity which, trifling though the incident were, displayed a most willing obedience; and scarcely was he seated by the Duke's side, when he said in an earnest manner, "Accept my sincerest thanks, dear uncle, for the handsome addition you have so continuously made to my own restricted income. I have endeavoured to render myself worthy of your generosity. And now, scarcely am I beneath your roof, when you make me offers of which any young man ought to be proud. I never *will*—I never can forget your goodness! God forbid that I ever should!"—and it was with the sudden impulsiveness of a naturally fervid nature, that Bertram took his uncle's hand and pressed it warmly in his own.

The Duke for an instant gazed upon him in wonderment, as he said to himself, "Is it possible that Bertram is a vile hypocrite—that in his heart he detests my marriage—that he is not altogether able to conceal his sentiments from my wife—but that fearing he has gone too far, he now seeks to propitiate and conciliate me?"

Yet there was nothing in the young man's countenance—nothing in the honest frankness with which his dark clear eyes encountered his uncle's looks—to justify those suspicions. The Duke was bewildered; and Bertram went on speaking.

"You asked me," he said, "if I would like to enter Parliament?—but I have no wish to remain in England. English habits and tastes do not suit one who has been upwards of three years abroad. Besides," added Bertram quickly, "my views are entirely cast in the diplomatic sphere; and therein, dear uncle, do I solicit your interest. Believe me, I am in haste to get abroad again—no matter to what part of the world! I deemed it my bounden duty to come to Oaklands to pay my respects to you—to assure your Grace of my gratitude—and to congratulate you on the happiness which you evidently enjoy."

"Yes—I *am* happy with my amiable Duchess," responded the Duke: and once more were his eyes fixed earnestly and scrutinizingly upon Bertram Vivian.

"Report had not failed to waft her manifold good qualities to my ears," he observed, without the slightest change of countenance, "even before I had the honour of meeting her Grace this day."

"And yet methinks, Bertram," said the Duke, "you hardly treated her with the friendliness of a relative."

The young man gave no immediate answer: he dropped his kerchief, and deliberately picked it up. This interval of a single moment was sufficient for him to recover complete self-possession.

"Rest assured, uncle," responded Bertram, "that my conduct shall ever be marked with the profoundest respect towards the Duchess of Marchmont——yes, *ever!*"

The Duke bit his lip for a moment. He thought there was something cold and distant in the answer—something which justified his suspicion that Bertram in his heart hated the match. But yet it was not a reply which would bear any comment on his Grace's part. It might even admit an interpretation which would throw out the delicacy of his nephew's feelings in the most admirable light. What if he considered that respect was the only, or at least the most becoming demeanour which he ought to adopt towards a lady a year younger than himself, and who had merely become connected with him by marriage with a relative?—what if he were to consider that anything savouring of a more advanced cordiality might touch upon familiarity, and that such familiarity might be viewed suspiciously by the world? And then too, Bertram had really so little to gain if the Duke had remained unmarried and if he were to die childless. The elder brother Lord Clandon would become Duke of Marchmont—he would no doubt marry—he would probably have issue—and Bertram Vivian would gain the empty title of a lord by courtesy, without a Peer's rank, and without a single additional farthing to his income.

All these thoughts swept through the mind of the Duke of Marchmont in the space of a few moments; and when he again turned his eyes upon Bertram Vivian, there was so much open-hearted frankness, so much lofty intellectuality, so much true grandeur of the soul depicted upon his faultlessly beautiful countenance, that the Duke felt he must have wronged him with his unfavourable suspicions,—while on the other hand, his favourable conjectures to account for his nephew's conduct towards the Duchess, must after all be the right ones. The gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, where coffee was served round. Bertram leant against the mantel-piece, at a distance from all the rest,—at intervals silent and abstracted—at others falling with well-bred readiness and intellectual ease into the conversation that was going on. He did not once approach the Duchess—he never addressed his observations to her: but then no one could consider this as extraordinary, inasmuch as his remarks were made generally, and not in reply to the previous observations of any particular individual. Still there was a visible restraint on the part of both Bertram and the Duchess: for she never once even so much as turned her eyes upon him; and she also had her intervals of silence and abstraction, which never were perceived before. The guests separated to their respective chambers with the conviction that Bertram hated the marriage, and that the Duchess fathomed his feeling and properly resented it in the way that a well-bred lady could alone exhibit her offended and indignant pride. The Duke of Marchmont, too, again wavered in his opinion, and was again inclined to think that this was the true reading of the mystery. He therefore said nothing to Eliza on the subject, for fear of wounding her feelings: but he secretly resolved that if these scenes were renewed, Bertram's visit to Oaklands should be cut very speedily short.

On the following morning, at breakfast, there was the same cold restraint—the same distant formality, between the Duchess and Bertram Vivian. When the amusements of the day were about to be settled, the Duchess proposed a riding-party amongst other recreations: whereupon Bertram, on being invited by the Duke to join it, excused himself on the plea of having letters to write. In the afternoon, when there was to be a boating party on the splendid piece of ornamental water in the neighbourhood of the mansion, Bertram begged to be excused from joining it, as his physician had recommended horse-exercise and he could not dispense with his daily ride. The guests were astonished. He would not ride when they rode; but he now chose to ride when they did not. The dinner was marked by the same sort of conduct: the evening passed in a similar manner; and the effect of all this was to throw a species of damp upon the spirits of the guests. The Duke himself now became cold and distant to Bertram; and not choosing to deign any farther discourse with him on the topic, resolved to speak to his wife.

"Eliza," he said, when they had retired to their chamber, "it is impossible I can conceal from myself the strange—I may even call it the rude and uncourteous manner in which my nephew behaves towards you."

For a moment the Duchess trembled from head to foot: but her agitation escaped her husband's notice. Then, almost instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she said in her serene calm voice, "I have nothing to complain of in Mr. Vivian's treatment."

Again was the Duke smitten with the thought that his favourable construction must be the true one—that Bertram was resolved his conduct should be merely respectful, and nothing more—that Eliza understood his meaning, appreciated it, and was not merely satisfied, but pleased. The Duke therefore said no more: but he thought within his own heart that this self-imposed restraint would necessarily be mitigated into a little more genial cordiality in the course of a few days.

The next three or four days, however, passed in precisely the same manner; and it became evident that Bertram absolutely avoided the Duchess as much as he possibly could. If when in the drawing-room, a movement was made by the guests which threatened to leave him alone with Eliza, he would abruptly quit the apartment. He had ceased to conduct her to the dinner-table: he placed himself (and some thought, studiously so) as far from her as possible. He never addressed himself direct to her, unless absolutely obliged; and then his tones were chillingly glacial. *Her* demeanour on the other hand began to grow evidently distressed, notwithstanding all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure. The truth is, it was an ordeal that was wearing her out: she could not support it. All her love for Bertram Vivian was revived with its full pristine power and tenderness. Indeed, it had never been extinguished: it had given place to resignation when she believed him to be no more—it had remained as it were lulled and subdued by the strong dominion of self-control during the year which had elapsed since, by the contents of her father's desk, she had discovered that he was alive—and when Bertram himself, in all his living, breathing beauty, again appeared in her presence, that love was inspired with fullest vitality once more. To be with him—to behold him often and often when all the rest thought that her eyes gazed elsewhere—to breathe the same atmosphere—to hear the melting music of his voice, at times pouring forth its eloquence as if in golden tones—to know that she might have been *his* after all, if no duplicity and deceit had sacrificed her—and what was more still, to have the inward conviction that he loved her even now as much as ever he had loved before,—Oh! all this constituted an ordeal fraught with anguish that was ineffable, with tortures that were harrowing, with an affliction the poignancy of which was crucifying!

The Duke of Marchmont was bewildered. At one time he thought one thing—at another time another. Now his conjectures were favourable to his nephew: the next moment they became quite the reverse. He felt as if a scene were passing around him which he could not understand—as if there were some strange mystery to the reading of which he possessed no possible clue. That things could not go on thus, he felt persuaded: but how was he to interfere? how was he to treat with importance a matter which in reality might have no importance at all? If he made up his mind to speak to his nephew, Bertram at once took the initiative of the discourse, but quite on some other subject; and all his expressions were most dutiful and affectionate towards his uncle. Thus the Duke would go away from him, leaving unsaid all he had meant to say. If he spoke to his wife when they were alone together, Eliza still declared that there was nothing in Mr. Bertram's conduct of which she had to make the slightest complaint; and she even added in an unguarded moment, "that it was precisely what it ought to be." The Duke put quite a different construction on her words from that which they ought to have borne; and giving her credit for a delicacy of feeling which though carried to an extreme, was yet in the right direction, he embraced her with all his uxorious fondness.

It was in the midst of these circumstances that Lord Clandon arrived at Oaklands on the promised visit. The brothers had not met since they separated more than three years back at that very same mansion, after the death of the late Marquis of Viviandale—that death which by altering their father's position at the time, had led to their recall from college. Bertram precipitated himself into Hugh's arms; and if the joy of the latter were less exuberant, it was not considered the less sincere, but merely that it had a different mode of demonstration, the dispositions of the two being not completely alike. Lord Clandon was all cordial courtesy and respectful friendliness towards the Duchess: his demeanour appeared to be precisely what it ought from a relative of his age to one of her's. Thus the presence of Lord Clandon at Oaklands threw out, by the effect of contrast, the cold reserve and glacial formality of Bertram into still stronger relief.

Lord Clandon had not been half-an hour on this occasion at the mansion, before he observed his brother's conduct towards the Duchess. At first he himself was as much astonished as the rest: for he had not the remotest suspicion of anything that had taken place between Bertram and Eliza when she was Miss Lacey at Oxford. Neither did he conceive it possible that his brother loved the Duchess; for if so, Clandon thought that Bertram would pursue quite a different course and would seek to render himself as agreeable as possible. There was a mystery to be cleared up; and Hugh resolved to penetrate it. But how? He threw himself in Bertram's way—walked out alone with him—turned the conversation on the Duchess—and endeavoured to draw his brother out. But not the slightest syllable of explanation was volunteered. Lord Clandon accordingly saw that he must go upon some other tack. He watched his brother's and Eliza's demeanour towards each other for the next two days: still all was mystery. Then he bethought himself of a plan to arrive at its solution.

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," he said to this lady, one morning courteously offering her his arm to escort her for a walk through the grounds after breakfast,—"have you observed nothing?"

"Observed what, my lord?" inquired the antiquated votary of fashion: "that the eldest Miss Lomax's hair is red, though it passes in a complimentary way for auburn—that Miss Rachel Lomax has freckles—and that Miss Mary drank three glasses of champagne yesterday at dinner?"

"No—nothing of all that," answered Lord Clandon. "You are a relation of my amiable, beautiful, and accomplished young aunt——"

"To be sure I am!" said the old lady, proudly. "It was at my house, your lordship is aware, that his Grace first met Eliza and became enamoured of her."

"I know it," rejoined Clandon. "And being the Duchess's relation, you are of course in her confidence?"

"Ah, there you are wrong, my lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "It is this which pains me. Eliza never consults me in anything. Even her very orders to her milliner are given without the least deference to my opinion; and though certainly everything becomes her——"

"Well then, my dear Mrs. Bailey," continued Hugh, "if you are not in her Grace's confidence, you ought to be. Yes—you ought to be," he added still more emphatically: "for there is something going on which no one can understand."

"It certainly struck me," said the old lady, "that the Hon. George Curzon is paying his addresses to Mary Lomax: but really I do not see that her Grace can interfere. Of course the young man's intentions are honourable——"

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," interrupted Lord Clandon, "it is not this that I mean. A lady of your shrewdness, experience, and penetration," he went on to say, in order to flatter the dame and win her over to his purpose,—"a lady of your tact and judgment——"

"I flatter myself that I am not deficient in all that," observed Mrs. Bailey, with a proud elevation of the head: "for I was the first to detect that the turtle-soup was burnt yesterday, and that there was no cayenne in the vermicelli."

"Then with such penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," quickly resumed his lordship, "you cannot possibly have failed to notice the extraordinary conduct of my brother Bertram towards the Duchess—and I might add, *her* equally extraordinary conduct towards *him*. I consult you as a relation of the Duchess—as her best and sincerest friend; and if there is anything to be done to bridge the gulf which evidently separates my brother from her Grace—if there be anything that can place them on a more cordial footing, pray make use of my services."

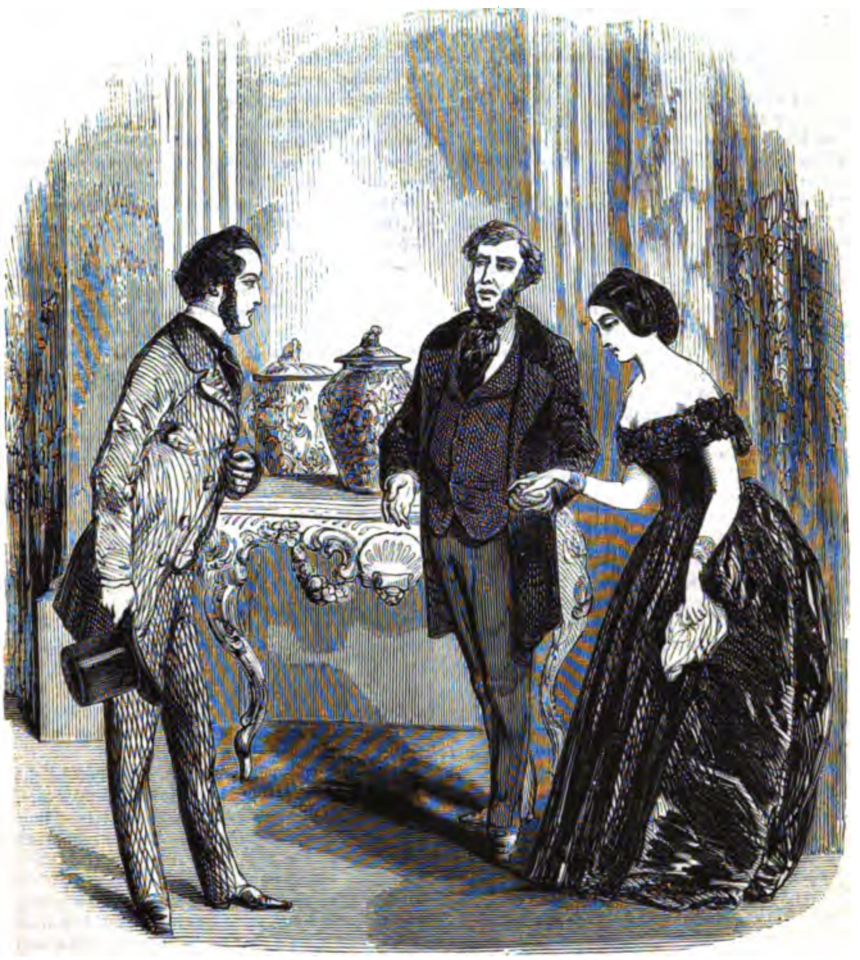
"Well, my lord," said Mrs. Bailey, delighted and flattered at being thought of so much importance as to be consulted in the matter, "there is something, you know—or rather you do *not* know: for it is a profound secret. The late Captain Lacey imparted it to me, strictly enjoining me however, not to divulge it. But as you have expressed yourself in such kind, such generous, such admirable terms, I think it would really be wrong for me not to take you into my confidence."

"My dear Mrs. Bailey, rest assured that I shall not abuse it;"—and Hugh spoke with the ill-repressed eagerness of one who hovers in suspense on the threshold of a mystery's solution.

"Well, I will trust you," said Mrs. Bailey, who was as frivolous as she was vain and selfish. "The fact is, Bertram and Eliza were acquainted at Oxford. They loved each other madly: they separated with an exchange of rings. I don't know whether they have them still: but I do recollect that Eliza wore her's very frequently up to the day of her marriage—but never since. Well, the report reached England of Bertram's death; and shortly afterwards Captain Lacey and his daughter removed to London to live with me. In due time the Captain received a letter from Bertram, expressing a hope that if the report of his death which was published in the English papers, had come to his knowledge, the contradiction had likewise been seen. This however had escaped the Captain's notice. Well, Eliza was beginning to be admired in my saloons; and though the Duke had not as yet seen her, there was every prospect of her forming some brilliant alliance. So I of course gave my advice on the subject: and of course Captain Lacey followed it. 'Bertram Vivian,' said I, 'is the mere cadet of a junior branch of a great family; and Eliza, with her beauty, can look much higher. Depend upon it, she will marry a peer of the realm. Keep this letter secret. Now that she is resigned to the belief of her lover's death, it is a pity to disturb that feeling. At all events, let her continue in ignorance of Bertram's miraculous escape until we see whether she cannot form a better match.'—Captain Lacey thought my counsel good, and adopted it."

"And therefore," observed Lord Clandon, "Eliza married the Duke in the belief that Bertram was no more?"

"Precisely so," answered Mrs. Bailey. "But I can assure you that for the last month or so, both her father and myself were dreadfully nervous and uneasy——I mean the last month previous to the wedding. For a *second* letter came from Bertram. It was addressed to the Captain at Oxford, as the former one was, and was sent on by the postmaster, with whom he had left an intimation whither his letters were to be forwarded."



"Yes—to be sure! quite prudent!" interjected Lord Clandon. "But that second letter——"

"It came to say that Bertram's love was as strong as ever," continued Mrs. Bailey,—"that the two years' test imposed by Captain Lacey had nearly expired—and that close upon the heels of the letter itself, Bertram was coming by the next ship to claim Eliza as his bride. Well, I certainly had some little difficulty in preventing the Captain from revealing everything to his daughter: but he was soon argued out of his foolishness—and so the match took place with the Duke, your uncle."

"And did you hear anything more of Bertram? did he call in Grosvenor Square when he visited England?" inquired Lord Clandon.

"No—nothing of the sort," answered Mrs. Bailey; "and I was very glad of it. Why should I have borne the brunt of his wild ravings? I suppose he saw the account of the marriage in the newspapers; and so the tale was told. It is very unfortunate he should have taken it into his head to come to Oaklands. For my part I think he had better have stayed away. However, it is impossible—considering all things—that he and the Duchess can behave to each other in a different way than what they do; and since he *has* chosen to come hither, I think their conduct is highly creditable to both. What I fear is that it may lead to some suspicion on the Duke's part——"

"You believe, then," interrupted Lord Clandon, "that my uncle is totally ignorant of the former acquaintance and of the love between Eliza and Bertram?"

"Oh, I am certain of it!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "Eliza positively assured her father, within an hour after the wedding, that never from her lips should her husband hear of the past—nor from her conduct be led to suspect that her heart was not his. And now, my lord, that I have told you the secret, what course do you consider it prudent to suggest?"

"These revelations, my dear Mrs. Bailey," responded Hugh, "have come upon me with such startling suddenness, that I am unable in a moment to proffer an opinion. I will tell you in a few days what I think ought to be done. Perhaps I may speak privately to my brother—worm out of him the history of his love—and then advise him to absent himself from a place where his presence is dangerous."

"In any case, my lord, do not compromise me," said Mrs. Bailey. "The Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian is civil and polite enough to me—for of course he cannot suspect that I had anything to do in leading Eliza to jilt him—and I do not want to be brought into collision with anybody."

"Rest assured, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Lord Clandon, "that I will manage the matter with as much tact and delicacy as if it were you yourself who had the conduct of it."

"I rely upon your lordship," said the foolish woman, who did not reflect that she had been avowing to the very individual most interested in the Duke's remaining unmarried, the schemes and stratagems to which she had been a party in order to bring about that alliance between his Grace and Eliza.

Having escorted Mrs. Bailey back to the mansion, Lord Clandon sauntered forth again into the grounds, to reflect upon all that he had just heard. Presently he beheld his uncle approaching along a shady avenue, accompanied by a large favourite bull-mastiff answering to the name of Pluto. His Grace was walking slowly, with the air of one in deep pre-occupation. The mystery of the scene which was constantly before his eyes, was bewildering him more and more; and he saw no issue thence by any feasible means.

"Ah! my dear uncle," said Clandon. "What! walking alone? Where are all the guests?"

"The Lomaxes are getting ready for departure," responded the Duke. "In fact, I don't wonder that they should have abridged their visit——"

Then stopping short, he suddenly stooped down to caress his dog in order to hide his vexation.

"What mean you, my dear uncle?" inquired Clandon, as if with an air of perfect surprise.

"I mean, Hugh," responded the Duke, suddenly turning his looks fixedly upon his nephew's countenance, "that there is something going on which I cannot comprehend. I must speak out: I am glad that accident has thus thrown you and me together at this moment. There is something in my heart that I burn to unbosom to a confidant. You love me, Hugh—you have testified the noblest and most disinterested attachment——I wish to God I could say the same of your brother!"

"What, my lord!" ejaculated Clandon: "has Bertram been wanting in love and respect towards your Grace—the head of the family—our benefactor—our uncle——"

"Hugh," interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, "it is impossible you could have remained blind to all that is going on. Bertram treats the Duchess with downright insult. At first his conduct was merely a cold reserve, on which the best interpretations might be put. But now he has been nearly ten days here; and instead of getting on a more friendly footing, he behaves with ill-concealed aversion. The Duchess, all amiability herself, will not admit that it is so: she cannot see through it. But I can blind myself no longer, Hugh. I have endeavoured in my own mind to make every possible allowance for Bertram—and all in vain. It is the blackest ingratitude on his part; and I am determined not to put up with it."

"But, my dear uncle," said Lord Clandon, with a conciliatory tone and manner, "pray do not judge hastily—pray do not visit your displeasure upon my brother. You have been pleased to signify that my conduct is worthy of your approval: as a favour therefore for myself, I entreat your Grace to be lenient towards poor Bertram."

"This intercession on your brother's behalf, Hugh, does you infinite credit," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. "But such conduct is intolerable! It is not merely insulting to the Duchess—insulting to myself—but insulting likewise to all the guests. A damp has been thrown upon the spirits of a circle which I gathered about me for purposes of gaiety."

"Would you, my dear uncle, permit me to offer a suggestion?" asked Lord Clandon, in a mild and submissive manner.

"To be sure, Hugh!" responded the Duke. "Speak! I am glad that your own magnanimous conduct enables me to treat you as a confidant. In a word, do you not think that your brother is chafed at this marriage of mine—and that he is venting his spite upon the Duchess?"

"No, uncle!" ejaculated Lord Clandon, with the emphasis of conviction: "I am certain that it is not so. Bertram is too generous-hearted, too magnanimous to entertain any such mean and paltry feelings. I, who know my brother's disposition well, can read the clue to the whole mystery."

"Can you?" exclaimed the Duke, full of delight and suspense. "Then, what is it? But take care, my dear nephew," he added more gravely, "how you suffer your love for your brother to blind your eyes to the real truth."

"Listen, uncle—and judge for yourself," responded Lord Clandon. "My brother is a young man naturally diffident—naturally afraid also of having his actions wrongly judged. He was ever like this. His very sensitiveness throws him into extremes: the delicacy of his sentiments sometimes renders his conduct seemingly outrageous. He doubtless trembles lest the slightest attention paid to his amiable young relative, should be wrongly construed——"

"Well, but those are the very conjectures with which I myself," interrupted the Duke, with an air of disappointment, "have sought to account for his conduct: but I fear that they are not the correct ones."

"Bear with me, uncle," said Hugh deferentially; "and grant me your patience. My brother is two years younger than myself; and though he has seen more of the world in the shape of travel, he knows less of it in useful experience. Regard his position!—a young man of a little more than three-and-twenty, suddenly presented to a lady-relative, even younger than himself. He feels that it is not for *him*, but for *her*, to define the degree of friendly intimacy and becoming cordiality on which they are to stand towards each other.

Doubtless as he found her ladyship, so has he modelled his own conduct."

"Indeed, Hugh," observed the Duke, as he slowly retrospected over all the details of his wife's and Bertram's bearing towards each other,—"I think you are right. And now I remember, the very first moment he made his appearance at Oaklands, Eliza did not receive him with a befitting welcome. Yes—there is much truth in your words. She neither gave him her hand, nor spoke a single syllable, till I prompted her to do both. I fear me that Eliza was to blame after all!"

"You see therefore, dear uncle, that Bertram has measured his own demeanour by that of the Duchess. Her Grace received him frigidly, as you have just explained to me. Now, Bertram has his pride as well as his sensitiveness——"

"I understand it all!" exclaimed the Duke. "Idiot that I was, not to comprehend it before! Of course, it was natural enough! Bertram thought himself slighted. He came with enthusiastic feelings of kindness towards us both; and at the very first instant of his encounter with the Duchess, those feelings were chilled within him. After so cold a reception, it was clearly for her, as the mistress of the mansion, to make amends by the increasing cordiality of her demeanour. She has been cold—she has been inhospitable; and Bertram's sensitiveness has shrunk from so much glacial reserve. Truly, Eliza has been to blame—and poor Bertram is to be pitied. I will go at once and speak my mind to the Duchess."

"Not so, dear uncle!" exclaimed Lord Clandon, holding the Duke back. "You have condescended to listen to my mode of reading the mystery——"

"You are as clear-headed, Hugh, as you are generous-hearted," cried the Duke. "Proceed! I will be guided by your counsel."

"If I were you," continued Clandon, "I would say nothing to the Duchess in the form of upbraiding: I would not even suffer her Grace to perceive that you understand the reason of Bertram's conduct, or that you attribute it to a prideful sensitiveness at her Grace's coldness. But this is what I would do:—I would take opportunities to throw her Grace and Bertram more together,—so that while the former will be forced to unbend, the latter will be compelled to take such unbending as an atonement for past inhospitality. It were a pity that there should be any differences in a family within the circle of which all the elements of happiness and good-fellowship are comprised."

"Right, my dear nephew!" exclaimed the Duke: "your counsel is admirable—and it shall be adopted. I will go at once and see what can be done. By the bye, the Lomaxes are about to take their departure: let us hasten to bid them farewell."

The Duke and Lord Clandon accordingly retraced their way towards the mansion, which they reached just as Sir William Lomax's travelling-chariot drove round to the front entrance. The Duchess and the other guests, including Bertram, came forth from the hall to see the Lomaxes off; and the farewells being said, the chariot drove away with Sir William and his family. Those who remained behind, lingered upon the steps in conversation for a little while—when the Duke abruptly said, "I forgot to tell you all that the new fountain has commenced playing this morning at the end of the lower terrace. Come—let us go and witness it. Clandon, give your arm to Miss Anstruther—Bertram, take you charge of the Duchess—Mrs. Bailey, permit me to be your escort."

Bertram Vivian could not possibly refuse an injunction so positively delivered: Eliza, on the other hand, could not decline the offer of his arm. The Duke flung a quick glance of satisfied triumph at his elder nephew, as much as to bid him observe how dexterously he had taken the first step in following his counsel; and the procession of ladies and gentlemen, consisting of pairs, moved away from the front of the mansion.

The feather rests not more lightly upon the ground from which the slightest breath of the zephyr may lift it, than did Eliza's hand on the arm of Bertram Vivian! They led the way towards the fountain; and Bertram's conversation was confined to topics of the veriest indifference,—Eliza only answering in monosyllables. The fountain was reached: it was flinging up its jet of water high into the air—and opinions of approval were generally pronounced.

"Now," said the Duke, "let us ramble without restraint about the grounds. The weather is too charmingly fine not to be taken advantage of. Bertram, I do not think you have seen the grapery; and I recollect that the Duchess was speaking of it this morning. You go thither. Mrs. Bailey, I promised to show you my golden pheasants: they are in this direction."

The party, consisting of pairs—as already said—separated from the vicinage of the fountain, and thus broke up as it were, each couple sauntering into the path which struck the fancy at the moment,—all but Bertram and Eliza; and they remained riveted near the fountain, each a prey to a deep inward agitation.

But they were now alone together!

CHAPTER VI.

BERTRAM AND ELIZA.

ALONE together, for the first time since they had thus met at Oaklands!—alone for the first time since they parted three years and some months back, in the little parlour at Oxford! Alone together!—dangerous position—and, Oh! how embarrassing—how full of ineffable feelings too, for those who had loved so tenderly and so well!

The Duchess was marble-pale: but on Bertram's cheeks there was the hectic flush of excitement,—not a flush gradually dying off into the surrounding whiteness of the skin—but a deep red spot upon either cheek-bone, as if consumption's illusive dyes were glowing there. A false, unnatural fire burnt in his eyes: it was evident that he felt like a man who had just reached some crisis which had been foreseen—which he had known must come—but yet, when it did arrive, found him utterly unprepared to meet it. He trembled with agitation: he could no longer repress his feelings. A glance over either shoulder showed him that the last couples of the party were disappearing in the shady avenues; and there he was, *alone* with her whose image was indelibly impressed upon his heart—whose love had been alike his elysian joy and his ineffable misery!

Several minutes passed: and there they stood, —Eliza seeming to have her looks fixed upon the fountain, but in reality beholding nothing—Bertram now contemplating her with the strong excitement of feelings too long pent up to be repressible any longer.

"Eliza!" he said at length: and that word—that name—was alone thrown out at the time from his lips: it was followed by naught beside: he knew not what more to say—and yet he felt that he had a million things of which to disburden his oppressed spirit.

And that name, when spoken by *his* lips, thrilled with galvanic effect through her entire form. Never had she thought that her own name was beautiful until she had first heard it pronounced by his tongue. And his voice, too, had all those melting cadences—all that clouded harmony of sadness, which is so perfectly but dangerously calculated to stir up the tenderest emotions of the soul.

"Eliza!" he repeated after a long pause, during which he had gazed on her with mingled rapture and despair: "at length we are alone together."

"And we ought *not* to be alone together," she answered, in a voice which would have been inaudible were it not for its natural clearness: and now her cheeks were suddenly mantled in blushes.

"Wherefore should we not be alone?" asked Bertram bitterly. "Is it that your conscience tells you I have come as an accuser—and that you are afraid to look your accuser in the face?"

"No, Mr. Vivian!" said the Duchess proudly, as she raised her eyes and fixed them on him for a few moments: then they were suddenly bent downward again, and the pearly tears gushed forth. "I see," she added, again in a voice scarcely audible, "that you believe me guilty of the foulest, vilest, most dishonourable perfidy. But it was not so——No, Bertram—it was not so!"

"What, Eliza?" he ejaculated in amazement: "what is this that I hear?"—then the next moment he added with scornful bitterness, "But you are heaping insult upon injury to treat me as a poor credulous fool!"

"Bertram," answered the Duchess, in a voice that was low but clear, and again raising her eyes towards his countenance, on which she gazed with the steadiness of innocence in her looks,—"as I have a soul to be saved—as there is an Almighty who hears my words now, and will punish me hereafter if I wilfully deceive you—I was not guilty!"

"Eliza," said Bertram, suddenly seized with the wild excitement of rage, fury, and indignation—and again his eyes flashed forth unnatural fires,—"if you were deceived, maledictions—ten thousand, thousand maledictions upon the heads of those——"

"Cease!" almost shrieked forth the horrified Duchess, her countenance expressing ineffable agony. "You would invoke curses upon the head of my perished father!"

"My God, I comprehend it all!" murmured Bertram: and he placed his hand upon his throbbing brows, as if thereby to steady the brain that rocked and reeled within.

"Yes," continued Eliza, now hurried away by the strong impulse which opportunity as well as her own feelings gave her to justify herself,—"I was deceived, Bertram—cruelly deceived! God, who alone can read the human heart, knows how true I was to you; and if an angel-witness were to appear before you now, that holy being could tell how I cherished your image while you were absent—how I cherished it even after the terrible report that you had gone down to a grave in the deep waters! Bertram, it was not until I became another's, that I learnt the tremendous truth that you were alive!"

"Eliza, Eliza! this is agony for me to hear!" murmured the wretched Bertram, his countenance filled with despair. "I wrote to your father twice——"

"I know it," she interrupted him softly—but, Oh! with what a world of ineffable feeling in her looks: "I know it. My father deceived me—— But spare him—spare his memory——May God have forgiven him!"

"Eliza," continued Bertram, "I believe you. There is truth in your looks—truth in your words. I always believed you truthful—until the fatal day, when on arriving in England to hasten and claim you as my bride, I read in a newspaper the report of your marriage. Just heaven! what searing, blinding, sight-blasting words for me! Do you know, Eliza, that for hours I was like one gone mad—that I strove to lay violent hands upon myself, and that the persons of the hotel prevented me?"

"Bertram, Bertram—tell me not all this!" moaned Eliza, sobbing bitterly: "it is more than I can endure! Since the first instant that the intelligence of your death reached me, my life has been one long agony—one continuous throe of indescribable despair. The rack may torture for hours or for days—and the miseries of the victim will end in death: but my rack, Bertram, has now lasted for more than two long years——and it will last, Bertram, until I go down into the cold grave where alone this heart of mine can be at peace!"

"Eliza, it is now for me to implore you to be calm—to entreat that you will not talk to me in this distracting, frightful way!"—and Bertram, falling on his knees upon the stone margin of the fountain's reservoir, took her hand and pressed it to his lips: but the next instant dropping it—nay, more, even tossing it away from him—he started up, exclaiming in violent excitement, "That hand is another's!—it is sacrilege in me to touch it!"

Eliza's tears fell fast and bitterly. She would not have withdrawn her hand of her own accord—at least not so abruptly as he had flung it from him. She was shocked—she was hurt—she was wounded: the affliction which that poor creature endured in those rending moments, was such as no man, even the most vindictive, could wish his mortal enemy to undergo.

"Pardon me, Eliza," said Bertram, in a tone of tenderest contrition; "I was rude—I was brutal. But, heavens! I am not the master of myself!"—and again he pressed his feverish hand to his wildly throbbing brows. "Let me say a few words of explanation," he resumed after a while, and speaking in a more collected manner. "By a miracle—or by almost one—I was rescued from a watery grave in the depths of the Potomac. I knew that the report of an accident in which so many lives were lost—indeed all save one—would be copied from the American into the English newspapers; and when recovered from the almost fatal illness of many weeks into which the shock and horror of the calamity plunged me, I lost no time in writing to your father. Not a doubt was in my mind but that your fears would have been relieved as to myself, long before that letter could reach England: but if not, it was beyond the power of human conception to suppose that your father would keep you in that dark, dreadful belief of my death. Oh, Eliza! how I counted the months—the weeks—the days—the hours, that were to elapse ere I beheld you again!—Oh, how I cherished your image! Never man loved as I loved—never, never!"

He turned abruptly aside; and his convulsive sobbings smote upon Eliza's ears—striking her very brain as if with a succession of heaviest blows—impaling her heart upon the stake of indescribable agony. And yet she dared not stretch out a hand to touch him—to awaken him as it were from that night-mare of hideous woe. She remembered that she was a wife; and though the very thought was crucifixion, it was nevertheless one which she must endure.

"Yes, Eliza," continued Bertram, when after a short space he grew calmer: "no man ever loved as I loved! At length I reached England," he continued, abruptly taking up the thread of his narrative—"joy, ineffable joy in my heart. Behold yon butterfly sipping the honey from the flower on which it has settled. Thus did my soul rest on the delicious sweets of its own reflections: thus did my spirit repose in delight upon the roseate tints of love, the fairest flower of the human heart! But what if a rude hand were abruptly stretched forth to clutch that poor butterfly, and stripping off its wings, were to toss it, still alive, on that parterre, to writhe out the rest of its existence in agonies—never more to sip the sweets of the flower from which it was taken? But thus was it with me: thus was it with the soul that lives in this breast!"

And as Bertram spoke, he beat his clenched fist violently upon his chest.

"You will drive me mad!" murmured Eliza, who seemed as if she were about to faint.

"Heaven forgive me," cried Bertram, "for torturing you thus!—but I cannot check this outpouring of my feelings. The burden of my sufferings is too great, Eliza, for my soul to bear. I have but a few words more to say; and I entreat you to hear them. I was at Liverpool when I read the account of your marriage in the paper—a marriage with my own uncle! What could I think, but that you were faithless to me? When reason returned, I wrote to the Government, entreating to be at once appointed to a post in another Embassy: for I had resigned my situation in that at Washington. My request was promptly acceded to: I was nominated to the Embassy at St. Petersburgh. Thither I sped without delay. Never did man travel so fast! It was the mad endeavour to outstrip my thoughts—to distance, so to speak, the agonies which, like pursuing fiends or ravenous wolves, were upon my track. At length I was ordered home to England with important despatches. I arrived, as you are aware, but a few days back; and I said to myself, 'I will see her once more. Such perfidy as her's, in return for so much love, must not go unreproached. Whatever the risk be, I will see her!'—And there was another reason too, Eliza: it was that I purposed to give back your ring, and to demand mine."

"Take back your ring, Bertram," said Eliza, in a low tremulous voice; and now it seemed to her that she was about to sever the very last feeble tie which in any way connected her with an elysian past;—and as she spoke, she slowly drew forth the ring from her bosom.

"Ah!" ejaculated Bertram Vivian, a wild joy flashing suddenly in his eyes: "you have kept it *there*—next to your heart! Oh! then, Eliza, you have not ceased to love me, even when becoming another's?"

"Bid the flower divest itself of its fragrance—bid the green plant put off its verdure of its own accord," she answered solemnly; "and it is commanding impossibilities. Bid the waters of that fountain cease to well upward while the motive power is there; and it were also commanding what cannot be done. Think not therefore that my heart could put away that love which has become as inseparable from it in life as the fragrance is from the flower or the verdure from the plant while the warm season lasts! Think not either that it is in my power to still the feelings which rise upward from the hidden springs of my soul!"

There was a holy solemnity—a sanctified pathos, in Eliza's tone as she thus spoke; and as her words ceased, she proffered the ring which she had drawn forth from her bosom.

"No, Eliza—no!" exclaimed Bertram, with renewed excitement. "I will not take it back! Whatever henceforth we may be to each other——and that perhaps is as nothing," he added bitterly——"still, still shall you retain the pledge of my love, as I will keep the pledge of your's. There can be no sin in this!"

"I will keep it, Bertram," answered the Duchess, after a few moments' hesitation; and she consigned the ring back to its resting-place next her heart.

"Oh! but if all this be possible," abruptly exclaimed Bertram Vivian, as fresh ideas came sweeping through his mind, but replete with newly awakened suspicion and mistrust, all the force and anguish of which were at the same instant reflected in his countenance,—"how was it, Eliza, that you bestowed your hand upon mine own uncle? Did it not strike you that there was something to shock the purity of the feelings——"

"Accuse me not, Bertram," interrupted Eliza, with a look full of candid yet mournful ingenuousness. "There is not a question you can put to me, which I am not prepared to answer. And I will answer every one frankly and truthfully. Oh! if this were not my purpose, I might shield myself in dissimulations of all kinds—I might affect offended pride and indignant innocence at being thus questioned! But as my soul is guileless, it needs not such artifices wherein to take refuge. Bertram," continued the young lady, with an expression of ineffable woe upon her countenance and anguish in her tones, "you know not all the arts that were adopted to enmesh me in this web which is inextricable. God forgive me that I should thus have to allude to my own father: but it is so! As I have a soul to be saved, I knew not that my husband was your uncle until the knowledge came too late. Never had I heard that the Marquisate of Viviandale had been changed into the Dukedom of Marchmont——"

"One word, Eliza!" ejaculated Bertram, who during the first portion of her speech had become all confidence and trustfulness in her sincerity,—but in whose heart the reptile of suspicion suddenly lifted up its head again: "is it possible that during the months of courtship my uncle never once alluded to myself?"

"Never once!" responded Eliza emphatically. "He never spoke of his relations—much less named them. And my father was careful that the name of Vivian should never be mentioned in my hearing, in connexion with the Duke of Marchmont. Are you not aware that the nuptials were private?"

"Ah, private! I understand!" ejaculated Bertram bitterly; "the better to exclude the members of the family! But as you have mentioned the nuptials, Eliza," he went on to say—and now his eyes were riveted upon her with all the scrutinising keenness of fresh suspicion, fresh distrust,—"when the minister was performing the ceremony, did he not ask you if you would take John Ferdinand Henry Vivian, Duke of Marchmont, as your husband? And you said *yes*!"

"Bertram," responded Eliza, steadily meeting his gaze with looks that were all ingenuous sadness and mournful innocence,—"that marriage ceremony was to me a dream at the time: it appears to me a dream now. I beheld everything through a mist: and if I look back upon it from the present moment, it still appears a something shrouded in obscurity and gloom. Yes, it was a dream—a waking dream, in which I slumbered with my eyes open. I beheld naught—I heard naught—I felt naught. No—I felt not even when the marriage-ring was placed upon my finger; and if I responded *yes* to the question that was put to me, it was either mechanically, or else because there was some one nigh to whisper the word in my ear. Had the name of him whom I was taking as a husband, been that of Lucifer himself, I should not have heard it—I should not have perceived it in that paralysis of the senses: I should have unconsciously become the bride of Satan! Oh, Bertram! it is not the least cruel of all the phases of the ordeal of torture through which my lorn and desolate existence has been dragged,—it is not the least cruel, I say, that I am compelled to give these explanations—these self-vindications now!"

"Oh! wretch that I am, it is I who torture you!" exclaimed Bertram, literally shivering from head to foot in the wildness of his excitement and the frenzy of his feelings: "I who love you so madly, am torturing you thus horribly! But again I declare to you, Eliza, that I am not master of myself! God knows I strive to look upon the world in the same light that I used to regard it—as one of sunshine and of flowers: but the sunshine turns into a dark noisome mist enveloping me in a pestilential haze—the flowers, so beautiful to the eye, appear to exhale poisons; and methinks that if I stretch forth my hand to pluck one, a reptile would start forth from amidst the foliage and fix its venomed fangs upon my flesh! Yes—everything is changed to me. The world appears to be made up of deceits, with a gloss over all: the parterres of roses are but hidden pitfalls for the feet. Is it not dreadful, Eliza, that one so young as I, should have his heart thus seared—thus warped—thus devastated, so that everything I behold or reflect upon is viewed with suspicion and mistrust?"

"It is dreadful—dreadful, Bertram!" murmured the unhappy young lady, quivering from head to foot. "But for heaven's sake, talk no more thus!"

"What would you have me talk of?" cried Bertram, with increasing bitterness. "Would you have me speak of happiness?—it is gone for ever. Of hope?—there is none for me. What inducement have I to prosecute a career which would have led me on to fame and fortune?—she on whose brow it would have been the proudest moment of my life to place the laurels won by intellect, or the coronet to be gained in the service of my country, has become another's. Ah, Eliza!" he ejaculated abruptly, as a fresh suspicion flashed to his mind: "you said just now that you had some knowledge of those letters which I wrote to your father——"

"I found them in his desk after his decease," interrupted the Duchess. "Then—and not till then—did I learn that you were alive. Then too—and not till then—did I learn that I might have been your's. No mortal eyes, Bertram, beheld my rending anguish on that occasion. But God saw it!—and believe me, that never did the heart of woman throb with such throes—never did human eyes shed such tears—never did living creature kneel for a while in such profound, dark, unutterable despair! And yet there was one thing, Bertram, for which I thanked God—and only *one* thing! It was that you had not perished in the deep waters—that your young life had not been snatched away!"

"Would to heaven that I had so died, Eliza!" ejaculated Bertram bitterly. "But those letters of mine—those two letters——did your father leave them that you might become acquainted with his guilt?"

"No," she responded. "Perhaps you have been told that he died suddenly—that he was stricken down all in an instant——"

"Aye, as if by the blasting lightning!" interjected Bertram, with a fierce sardonic bitterness. "Perhaps there was heaven's retribution in that!"

"Spare me, spare me!" moaned the wretched Eliza, clasping her hands in agony. "Remember that it is to the daughter of that departed father you are now speaking!"

"God help me, Eliza!" exclaimed Bertram, once more pressing his hand to his brow, and staggering back a few paces: "I tell you that I am going mad. But those letters—wherefore had he not destroyed them?"

"It is a mystery which I cannot explain," replied the Duchess, in a low murmuring voice. "Perhaps an unknown — an unaccountable influence led him to preserve them:—or perhaps it was an oversight——"

"No, no, Eliza!" ejaculated Vivian, with feverish quickness: "it was no oversight—it was the all-powerful, unseen, unknown, but irresistible influence of which you have spoken. The finger of heaven was in it! It was decreed that the evidences of my constancy, my fidelity, my unperished and imperishable love, should survive your father—that those evidences should not constitute a secret to die with him—but that they should exist to meet your eyes, and convince you that Bertram Vivian was true to his plight!"

"And do you still mean to reproach me?" asked Eliza, in tones that were scarcely audible, while the tears rained down her cheeks. "It is cruel, Bertram—it is unkind—after all the explanations I have given you. Methought that you were ere now satisfied of—of—my own imperishable love, when you saw that I carried your ring next to my heart?"

"Eliza, I have wronged you!" exclaimed Vivian, who throughout this long and painful interview had been moved by a thousand different and conflicting impulses. "Pardon—forgive me! My conduct has not only been unkind: it is brutal—cowardly—base! You have been a victim—I see it all——May heaven have mercy upon us both!"

"And now, Bertram," asked Eliza, at length coming to the question which she had foreseen must be put, "what is to be done? how will you act?"

"What mean you?" he demanded abruptly, a wild joy flashing in his eyes. "Would you——"

"Bertram, Bertram!" almost shrieked forth Eliza, as she read what was passing in his mind. "No!—there is *one* sacrifice I cannot make for you; and this is the sacrifice of my duty to my husband. I would lay down my life for you: but not for worlds would I prove faithless to the vows of duty, constancy, and obedience which I pledged to him whose name I bear!"

"Eliza, forgive me—pardon me—I beseech you!" said Bertram, in a tone and with a look of deepest, most humiliating contrition. "If for an instant I yielded to the wild—the thrilling—the impossible hope which flashed to my mind, it was not that I could deliberately insult the purity of your character. No, no! heaven forbid that I should prove a villain—that I should brand myself as a wretch——No, no—I will not!"

He seized the hand of the Duchess as he thus enthusiastically spoke, and pressed it with convulsive violence.

"Bertram," she said, in a low soft voice, as she gently disengaged her hand, "again I ask you what you will do, now that the interview which was inevitable has taken place? You must not remain here."

"And I cannot leave all in a moment!" quickly responded Vivian. "Take my arm—let us slowly return to the mansion. For a few days, Eliza, must I linger here: it would excite the strangest thoughts if I were to depart precipitately."

"And I have been half afraid, Bertram," murmured the Duchess, "that strange thoughts have already been excited by your demeanour towards me."

"Oh, I have been half mad!" he ejaculated. "I have known not what to do. When coldest and most distant towards you—when, believing you wilfully faithless, I have been pointedly frigid and reserved in my manner—my heart was in reality bursting. I could have thrown myself at your feet, imploring your pardon—I could have cried out in the strong voice of my agony—I could have melted into tears and wept like a child. But you ask me what I will do? I will remain yet a few days, until the Duke shall have procured for me the promised diplomatic situation in some far-off land—the farther off, the better: and then, Eliza, we will part——to meet no more!"

The Duchess gave no response. She took Vivian's arm; and they walked on together through a shady avenue towards the house. She would fain have urged his prompt departure: she trembled lest, after this interview, there should be a change in their demeanour towards each other, so marked and pointed as to excite attention. But how could she express a wish to hurry him away? how could she utter the word which was to make him precipitate the moment when he would bid farewell to her for ever? She could not—she had not the heart to do so: while on the other hand, she felt so firm in the rectitude of her own principles—so strong in the sense of that duty which she owed to her husband—that she did not even insult herself by thinking of the necessity of avoiding temptation.

They entered the mansion; and Eliza at once retired to her own boudoir—there to reflect, in solitude and without restraint, upon all that had taken place——and there, perhaps, to weep likewise over her sad, sad lot which might have been so different!

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADY AVENUE.

THAT evening, when a domestic entered the drawing-room to announce that dinner was served up, Bertram hastened forward to escort the Duchess of Marchmont to the banqueting-room—an act of courtesy which for some days he had ceased to perform. And now, too, it was all the more marked, inasmuch as it was the place of his elder brother, Lord Clandon, to perform that ceremonial office. But the Duke was pleased when he beheld the incident; and he flung a significant look upon Lord Clandon, as much as to bid him observe that the Duchess and Bertram were already getting upon a little more friendly footing, so that the elements of discord might be expected soon to disappear from the bosom of the family.

Bertram sat next to the Duchess at dinner; and though a complete change had taken place in his mind towards her—though he now regarded her as a victim who still loved him, and not as a wilfully faithless one who had ceased to love—he had a sufficient power of self-control not to show by his conduct any abrupt alteration in his feelings. He was now, to all outward appearance, courteously polite, and nothing more,—courteously polite and profoundly respectful. Still that politeness,—evidencing itself in the thousand little attentions which the circumstances of the dinner-table enable a gentleman to manifest towards a lady next to whom he is placed,—was a considerable advance upon the former glacial frigidity of his demeanour. The Duke however was pleased: Lord Clandon seemed likewise gratified by his brother's courtesy towards their young and beautiful relative; and his lordship took an opportunity to whisper to the Duke when the ladies had retired, "You see, dear uncle, that my advice was good. Her Grace has unbent somewhat; and Bertram's wounded pride is healing proportionately."

On the following day there was a riding-party after breakfast. Bertram required not to be pressed to join it; and somehow or another, he found himself, when they started off, by Eliza's side. In the afternoon there was a boating-party: Bertram had no letters to write—no other kind of exercise, recommended by his physician, to take—no plea of indisposition to keep him indoors. He escorted the Duchess to the barge; and he again kept by her side when they took their places therein. But at dinner-time prudence whispered in his ear that he must not continue to monopolize the society of his fair relative: Lord Clandon therefore escorted her to the banqueting-room.

In the evening, when they were all in the drawing-room, Lord Clandon, after lounging about with a languid fashionable ease—chatting to one, then to another—pausing to look over a print, or loitering a few minutes near the piano at which a young lady was seated,—presently dropped into a chair next to that occupied by the Duchess: for Bertram, having been seated with her for the previous half-hour, had thought it prudent to bestow some attention on others present.

"You know not," said Lord Clandon, in a low voice to Eliza, "how deeply I felt my first meeting with that dearly beloved brother of mine, after our separation of more than three years. Your Grace must not think me so spoilt by the pursuits of the fashionable world, as to have lost all fraternal love. Besides, Bertram is a brother of whom one can be proud. I do really believe he is the handsomest young man in all England. What exquisitely chiselled features! what symmetry of form! But all that is nothing in comparison with the light of intellect which shines upon his noble brow. And yet I fear me," added Clandon, in a tone of mysterious confidence, "that he is not happy."

Eliza was actually frightened as Hugh addressed her in these terms. She trembled to the very utmost confines of her being—but it was with an inward tremor, outwardly invisible. She dreaded lest Clandon had penetrated the secret: but as she bent her searching gaze upon him, while he was riveting his own looks upon the graceful form of Bertram at the farther extremity of the room, she felt satisfied that there was really nothing significant in his remarks—but that they were merely conversational, the topic being caught up by accident at the moment.

"Yes," continued Clandon, "I believe and hope that Bertram is destined to shine in the world. My uncle, your Grace's noble husband—as noble in nature as he is in name—has written most pressingly to the Government to appoint Bertram as Minister to one of the minor Courts; and I have no doubt that in a few days intelligence will arrive that the Duke of Marchmont's interest has not been exercised in vain."

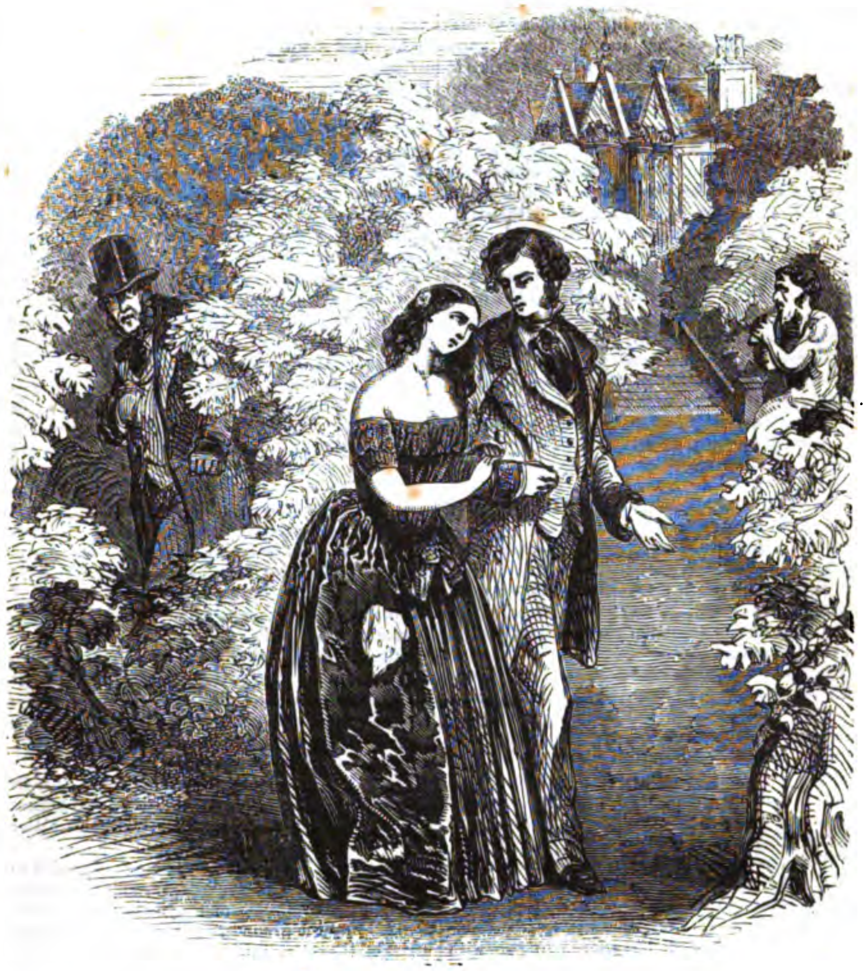
Eliza made some suitable response; and Lord Clandon, after a little more conversation of the same sort, highly eulogistic of Bertram,—rose and sauntered away to another part of the room.

"My dear Mrs. Bailey," he presently took an opportunity of whispering in this lady's ear, "you saw yesterday and to-day that there has been some little change in my brother's demeanour towards the Duchess. The fact is, I have no doubt things will be all right now; and those two in whom we are both naturally so much interested, will get upon that amicable footing whereupon they ought to stand together."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Bailey, also in a low cautious tone. "I thought that Mr. Vivian was behaving differently: for when we met at breakfast this morning, and the Duchess glanced at the cold chicken, your brother was the first to offer her a wing."

"Nothing can transcend your shrewdness and penetration, my dear Mrs. Bailey," rejoined Clandon with a smile: and he then lounged towards the piano again.

A week passed away from the date of that interview which we have recorded at such length in the preceding chapter—an interview in which all the acutest and intensest feelings of which human nature is susceptible, were called into play. Bertram and Eliza loved as fondly as ever: how could it be otherwise? But still they were both shielded against temptation by the rectitude of their principles; and thus when left alone for hours together, it was only in their looks and in their sighs that the Duchess was unfaithful in her duty to a husband, or Bertram in that towards an uncle. They spoke no more of their love: it was a topic which by tacit consent they avoided. There was no significant pressure of the hands—no embrace snatched—no kiss exchanged. Yet as they sat or walked together, they often found themselves, when unobserved by others, gazing into the depths of each other's eyes; and when suddenly recollecting that there was impropriety and danger in this, they averted their looks amidst blushes on the cheeks and sighs coming up from the heart,—those looks however which were again so soon to meet and blend in the soft transfusion of their spirits! And these looks, impossible of control—impossible of repression, conveyed all the adoration which was mutually felt,—fondness commingling with fondness—the beams of tenderness entertwining together. But their discourse, as we have already said, was not upon love; and they were both too intellectual to dwell incessantly upon light every-day topics—while, on the other hand, they could not bring their minds to the calm, serious, deliberate discussion of books, the sciences, or the arts. Therefore was it that long intervals of silence would reign between them—but a silence only of the tongues—a silence in the midst of which a thousand things were said by the eloquent language of the eyes. Any stranger who might have seen that young man of god-like beauty, and that young lady of excelling loveliness, would have at once concluded that they were mated in marriage, or that they were lovers soon to be so joined: for even the most superficial glance must have perceived a certain fitness in the union of this couple. But destiny had decreed otherwise:—they loved, yet they were not mated; they adored each other—but a stupendous gulf existed between them.



The Duke of Marchmont never for a moment suspected that it was possible for his wife and Bertram to form an attachment for each other—much less that they already loved from an old-standing acquaintance. He believed in the high honour of his nephew and in the purity of his wife. And he was right in so believing. He never even asked himself whether it were dangerous that they should thus be thrown together: the thought never for an instant entered his head. He was by no means a jealous man: that is to say, his jealousy was difficult to excite save and except by palpable evidence and on unquestionable grounds. He had flattered himself that Eliza loved him; and in the glacial coldness which she and Bertram had mutually shown during the first few days of the young man's presence at Oaklands, he had seen what he thought to be the demonstrations of positive aversion towards each other. Now, therefore, that he saw their manner mutually changed, he rejoiced to think that they had got upon a more friendly footing; and he said to himself, "Eliza is making atonement for her chilling inhospitality of the first ten days; and Bertram, with a chivalrous magnanimity, is doing his best to convince her that her former conduct is forgotten and forgiven. Hugh certainly gave me the best possible advice; and I wronged poor Bertram when I attributed the frigid reserve of his demeanour to an ungenerous aversion to the alliance which I have formed."

Thus, we say, did a week pass from the date of that interview in which Bertram and Eliza gave mutual explanations, and passed through such an ordeal of rending, agonizing emotions. This week flew rapidly away in the estimation of the two lovers: for such indeed they were. They both felt that it was wrong to be so much together,—dangerous to what little remained of their wrecked happiness, if not dangerous to their virtue. Yet by an irresistible attraction were they brought together again and again; and each successive day beheld them more and more in each other's society. This was at least some happiness for them: it was another dream in which they were to a certain extent cradled,—but a dream to the waking up from which they neither dared to look forward. At length however they were startled from this dream, as rudely as a loud clanging bell smites upon the ear of a sleeper; and they were startled up, too, unto a sense of anguish as acute as that which the doomed one feels when wakened by the striking of the clock which tells him that in another hour he is to die.

One morning, when the letters and newspapers were placed upon the breakfast-table, by the Duke of Marchmont's side, there was one document amongst the missives, which the experienced eye of Bertram at once recognised as a despatch from the Foreign Office; and the quick glance which he threw upon the Duchess, made her likewise aware that something might now be expected—something that should decree the doom of separation. The Duke took up the packet—opened it—read it—and then, extending his hand to Bertram, said with a smiling countenance, "Permit me, my dear nephew, to be the first to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister to the Court of Florence."

"And I, my dear brother," exclaimed Lord Clandon, with every demonstration of pride and joy, "likewise congratulate you on this distinguished promotion."

Eliza proffered congratulations also: but it was with an almost preterhuman effort that she kept down the flood of feelings which surged up into her very throat. Mrs. Bailey and the other guests followed in the congratulatory strain: but the Duchess perceived that it was with a forced urbanity and a difficultly repressed petulance of impatience, that Bertram responded in a suitable and becoming manner.

"You perceive, my dear nephew," resumed the Duke, "that your nomination to the Tuscan Embassy is accompanied by the strictest injunctions that you set off for Italy with the least possible delay. Much as I shall be grieved to part with you, I dare not suffer my own selfish feelings to stand in the way of your public duties. To-morrow therefore, Bertram, you must bid us farewell."

"Yes—to-morrow!" said the young man, in a voice the strangeness of which was only comprehended by Eliza—unless indeed it were also understood by Lord Clandon, who knew the secret of their love: for Mrs. Bailey was at the moment too busy in the discussion of a piece of Perigord pie to take notice of anything else.

After breakfast Eliza and Bertram walked forth together in the garden: Mrs. Bailey and the other guests accompanied Lord Clandon on a visit to the grapery: the Duke of Marchmont retired to the library, to address a letter to the Foreign Secretary thanking that Minister for the prompt attention paid to his request on Bertram's behalf. But on reaching the library, the Duke perceived a note lying on the writing-table, addressed to himself. He wondered that it should have been left there, instead of being brought in unto him, as was the custom with all correspondence, the instant of its arrival. It was not a letter with any postmark upon it; and therefore it had not come from any distance. The writing of the address was unknown to the Duke: but it occurred to him that it was written in a feigned hand. The writing all sloped backward instead of forward, just as if penned by the left hand instead of with the right: in short, it bore every indication of a studied attempt to disguise what it naturally would have been.

The Duke opened it: but scarcely had he read the first two or three lines, when the note dropped from his hand. He grew pale as death: sickness at the heart first seized upon him—then an almost maddening rage; and he was rushing to the door, when he abruptly stopped short. He grew calm all in an instant: but it was a terrible calmness—a calmness full of deep portentous menace. He picked up the note, and read it through. Its contents were not long: but they were significant—fearfully, terribly significant. This much might have been judged, were an observer present, by the growing corrugation of the Duke's brow,—the contraction of his forehead into lines so deep, so strongly marked that it appeared as if they never could leave that forehead in its wonted smoothness again.

"No," he muttered between his teeth, "it cannot be! It is a foul base calumny. An anonymous writer!—what faith is to be put in him? And yet—and yet——Eternal God! if it be so, I am the most miserable of men. Aye, but my vengeance shall be terrible!"

Then he paced to and fro in violent agitation,—until suddenly stopping short again, he looked at the letter once more. Dark and ominous was the shade which came over his countenance: his eyes shone with a sinister fire—his lips, ashy white, quivered as if with the palsy.

"No, no!" he ejaculated at length, and as if in answer to some thought or plan which had almost settled itself in his mind; "not without better proof than this!"

He slowly folded up the note—consigned it to his waistcoat-pocket—and issued from the mansion by a private staircase and a side-door. He descended into the grounds,—plunging at once in the midst of the most thickly wooded avenues. In a few minutes he beheld his wife and Bertram walking at a little distance. She was not leaning upon his arm: there was nothing in their demeanour to confirm the suspicion and justify the jealous rage which that anonymous letter had excited in the Duke's soul. Presently they turned at the end of the avenue: he concealed himself behind a group of evergreens, too thick for himself either to see or to be seen. But it was to their discourse, as they passed the spot, that he meant to listen. In a few minutes they drew near; and quite unconscious who was hidden by those bushes, they did pass.

"I shall leave immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning," Bertram was saying. "I must first repair to London, to pay my respects to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs; and then without loss of time must I proceed to Florence. It is most kind of my uncle to have interested himself in procuring me this appointment."

"Most kind!" observed Eliza.

Then there was a pause in the discourse; so that as they passed on, the Duke heard no more of the conversation when it was resumed. But if through the dense foliage his eyes had been able to observe the countenance of the two lovers, he would have seen that their looks were mournfully significant enough—though the words which had reached his ears were without the slightest import. Yet even in them there *was* a significancy, though the Duke comprehended it not. They had been conversing seriously on the approaching separation: they had exerted all their fortitude to the attunement of their minds to the point necessary to make them recognise and acknowledge that it was better they should thus separate. There was consequently in their hearts a thankfulness of deeper meaning towards the Duke, than that which their words seemed to express,—a thankfulness that through his interest the opportunity and period had been brought about for a separation which they both laboured to recognise as so necessary. But the Duke of Marchmont, who neither saw their looks nor had overheard the previous portions of their discourse, was for a moment shocked that he should have given way to jealous suspicions on the faith of an anonymous letter. He was seized with a sense of profound humiliation: the natural pride of his soul revolted against his own conduct; and hurrying away from his hiding place, he regained the mansion by a circuitous path.

Nevertheless the fiend of suspicion had obtained an entry into his soul: the demon of jealousy could not be so readily expelled as he wished, hoped, and thought. He endeavoured to compose himself to write—but he could not. He was restless and uneasy; and twenty times during the next hour, did he draw forth the anonymous letter and scan its contents again. When luncheon was served up, he carefully watched the conduct of Bertram and Eliza towards each other, though without having the slightest appearance of doing so. His perception was now sharpened; and he caught a rapid exchange of glances between them, which under other circumstances he would not have noticed, but which were now fraught with a tremendous significancy to his imagination.

After luncheon, Lord Clandon proposed a boating-party, which was readily assented to by every one present. Again did the Duke, during this recreation, continue to watch his wife and Bertram: but nothing occurred to strengthen his suspicions—and once more did he endeavour to reason himself into the belief that they were utterly unfounded. At about four o'clock the company, leaving the boats, retraced their way to the mansion; and the ladies separated to their own chambers to make some change in their toilets. The Duke retired to the library, which commanded a view of the grounds; and from the window did he keep watch. Presently he beheld Eliza and Bertram straying forth alone together, and slowly bending their steps towards the shady avenues. Again too did he descend by the private staircase and issue forth by the side door.

It was a delicious autumnal afternoon; and a genial warmth filled the atmosphere. Eliza had already dressed herself for dinner, when putting off her boating raiment, so as to avoid the trouble of performing another toilet. She wore a dark half-mourning dress—with a low body, according to the fashion of the times. Her arms were bare—those arms so exquisitely rounded: her bosom, neck, and shoulders shone dazzlingly in their polished whiteness. Nothing sets off a finely rounded form to greater advantage than dark apparel; and nothing can throw out the transparent purity of the skin more brilliantly. The superb contours of Eliza's shape, now in all the glory of rich womanhood—and the spotless beauty of her complexion, were thus advantageously displayed by her half-mourning garb. Her raven hair, with a rich velvet gloss upon it, flowed in heavy masses upon those dazzling shoulders, and formed a dark cloud against which her swan-like neck seemed an alabaster pillar. Never in the eyes of Bertram Vivian had she seemed so wondrously beautiful before; and as he walked by her side, gazing upon her with an irresistible fascination,—his heart, first melting into tenderness, was soon rent with agony at the thought that this was the last time they would ever be alone together—the last time perhaps that he would ever have an opportunity of so gazing, without restraint, on the object of his heart's adoration! And she too was profoundly moved. He had said at the interview by the fountain that when they parted it would be for ever; and these words he had not since recalled:—they remained therefore deeply imprinted upon her heart.

"To-morrow, Eliza," said Bertram, at length breaking a long silence, and speaking in the low deep voice of indescribable mournfulness,—"to-morrow we shall separate—and prudence tells me that it must be for ever! Would to God," he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of that wild excitement which he had displayed at the fountain, but to which until now he had not again given way,—"would to God that I had not lingered here so long! I feel like one whose next step will be to plunge into the vortex of despair."

"Bertram, Bertram," murmured the afflicted lady, "we must exert that fortitude which by tacit consent has hitherto sustained us since we met yonder:"—and her eyes glanced towards the fountain.

"Oh! that expression of tacit consent, Eliza," ejaculated Vivian,—"does it not show that there is a blending of our spirits—a secret intelligence existing between our hearts—a transfusion of feeling from soul to soul——"

"Hush, Bertram!" said the Duchess: "we must not—we dare not give way again to our recollections of the past!"

"Oh! but that past is all our own, Eliza," cried Vivian, with growing excitement; "though the present is taken from us—and the future——Ah! that future, dating from to-morrow—it will be a hideous blank on which I shudder to fix my gaze! No—not a hideous blank: it will be a world of rending, torturing feelings——By heaven, Eliza, I shall go mad! I cannot endure it—I shall lay violent hands upon myself!"

"Bertram!" almost shrieked forth the wretched Duchess, in a voice of piercing agony, "you horrify me—you fill me with despair!"

"Heaven forgive me, Eliza, for thus torturing you," said Bertram quickly; "but I am not able to control my feelings. Oh! wherefore was I born to endure so much misery? wherefore did I ever know you? Angel that you were to me at the time when we first loved, it is anguish—it is torture—it is crucifixion, to look upon you with the knowledge that you are lost to me—that you are another's! O Eliza, you know not how much I was indebted to that love of your's. I never told you the truth before: I will tell it to you now. I was plunging headlong into the vortex of dissipation—I was weakly and shamefully suffering myself to be led on into vicious pleasures and the ways of extravagance, when you suddenly appeared in my path, clothed with all the brightness and the sweetness of a guardian angel. I loved you—you loved me in return; and it was that delicious love of your's which made me an alterėd being. From that moment my existence has been one of purity and honour; and I can look the world in the face without being conscious of aught to raise up a blush to my cheeks. It was you who did this, Eliza—you who saved me! How much therefore do I owe you!—with what grateful recollections is my love intertwined! Think you, then, that a love which is so blended with gratitude, can easily endure disappointment? No, Eliza—no. You are dearer to me than life; and to-morrow, when we separate, it will be for me like parting from that very life itself!"

"O Bertram, what can I say—what can I do, to comfort you?" murmured the almost heart-broken Eliza, as the tears rained down her cheeks and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"What can you do—what can you say, Eliza? Nothing, nothing! There is but one thing—— No, no—I dare not mention it: I will not entice you from your husband! But to leave you with him, is to condemn myself to a life of horror—or else to cut it short and perish in the blood of a distracted suicide!"

"Bertram," shrieked Eliza wildly; "recall those dreadful words. Oh, recall them, I implore you! For my sake—for all the love I bear you——"

"Oh, to hear you speak thus of your love," cried the impetuous and impassioned Bertram, "is the revival of joy ineffable!"—and obedient to the impulse of the moment, he caught Eliza in his arms—he strained her to his breast.

At that instant a cry so wild and savage that it resembled that of a ferocious hyena, smote on the ears of Bertram and the Duchess; and starting from each other's embrace, they flung their terrified looks around. Those looks encountered the Duke, who was just emerging from a shady avenue. Emerging!—no, he was rushing on with the mad fury of the wild beast whose cry his own had resembled; and Eliza, with a half stifled moan of soul-crushed agony, dropped senseless upon the ground. All in an instant the spectacle of the rabidly advancing Duke vanished from Bertram's gaze: he beheld only the inanimate form of the beloved Eliza. He raised her in his arms: kneeling upon the ground, he supported her against his breast: he besought her in passionate accents to open her eyes and to look upon him.

"Leave her, sir!" thundered the voice of the Duke: "leave her, sir! Begone—depart hence, execrable villain that you are!"

"Hear me, uncle—hear me, I conjure you!" exclaimed Vivian, a prey to such wild and torturing feelings as no pen can describe. "If not for my sake, at least for her's——"

"Begone, sir!" again thundered forth the Duke: and rushing forward, he violently tore the still inanimate form of his wife from Bertram's arms.

At this instant it happened that two of the female-servants, having been to some other part of the grounds, appeared upon the spot, to which they were attracted by the fierce and thundering ejaculations of their ducal master. They were astounded at what they beheld,—that master tearing away his wife from the arms of Bertram Vivian—the Duchess insensible—Bertram himself pale and quivering with excitement!

"Bear your mistress to the house," said the Duke sternly; "and consign her to the care of her maids."

The two female domestics hastened to obey the instructions thus given them; and as they bore away the inanimate form of Eliza, the Duke turned to follow.

"Uncle, for God's sake hear me!" cried Bertram, in a voice of most imploring agony, as he caught the Duke by the arm.

"Not a word, sir—not a single word!" vociferated the furious husband: and in his mad rage he struck his nephew a violent blow upon the temple.

The young man's countenance became crimson,—turning all in a moment from the whiteness of a sheet to the hue of a peony; and his first impulse was to avenge the blow. But not more quickly flashes the lightning through the air, than did the recollection glance in unto Bertram's mind that it was his uncle—a much older man than himself—who had thus struck him: and turning abruptly away, he rushed madly along the avenue. At the extremity thereof he encountered his brother, Lord Clandon.

"Bertram! for heaven's sake what is the matter?" exclaimed Hugh, with an air of amazement at his brother's fearfully excited looks and frenzied pace.

"Hugh," cried Bertram, stopping suddenly short, and addressing Lord Clandon in broken sentences; "something terrible has happened—terrible, terrible! Our uncle believes that Eliza is guilty——For God's sake go to him! assure him that on the oath of one who never yet was convicted of falsehood, she is innocent!——Dearest, dearest brother, save poor Eliza—save her, for God's sake!—no matter what may happen to me!"

"But what has occurred, Bertram? Tell me! speak!——You know that I will do anything I can to serve you——"

"The tale is too long to tell," hastily responded the younger brother; "and every moment is precious—precious as life itself! Go quick—see the Duke—swear to him that his wife is innocent! Go, Hugh—go, I beseech you!"

"But where can I see you again?" asked Lord Clandon quickly. "It is evident that you are in a state of excitement——"

"See me?" ejaculated Bertram, as if for a moment scarcely comprehending the question. "Yes, yes—I must see you again—I must receive the assurance that the Duke is satisfied! Where shall we meet? I dare not return——Come to me presently at the village-tavern: I will await you there."

"Be it so," rejoined Clandon rapidly. "I will do my best:"—and he hurried towards the mansion: while Bertram Vivian pursued his own frenzied, distracted course in the direction of the village about a mile distant.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AVENGING HUSBAND.

LORD CLANDON reached the house; and in the looks of the domestics whom he found in the hall, he beheld consternation and wonderment depicted. At the same instant the Duke of Marchmont came hastening down the staircase, crying in a loud voice, "Let Mrs. Bailey's carriage be got ready this moment! Hasten away, some of you, to give the orders!—let there be not a single instant lost unnecessarily!"

Three or four footmen scampered off to the stables to issue their master's commands; and the Duke, now perceiving Lord Clandon, walked straight up to him with sternly fierce looks, and said in tones of deep, concentrated rage, "Hugh, my happiness is wrecked through your accursed counsel!"

"For heaven's sake, my dear uncle," exclaimed Lord Clandon, "do not reproach me! Be just—be generous—as you have ever yet proved yourself."

"O Hugh, I am half mad!" murmured the Duke. "Forgive me—I wronged you! But come hither."

Thus speaking, he hurried his nephew into the nearest parlour; and when they were alone there together, he began pacing to and fro in the most violent agitation.

"My dear uncle, it kills me to behold you thus!" said Clandon, approaching his relative with an air of earnest sympathising entreaty. "Tell me what I can do——"

"Nothing, nothing: my happiness is gone for ever! And yet," said the Duke, suddenly assuming a calmer aspect and a more dignified manner, "I ought not to torture myself thus for a vile woman and an infamous young man. Hugh, are you aware," he added, speaking as if through his set teeth, "that she whom I lately called my wife and loved as such, is unworthy of that name and of that love?"

"Alas! my dear uncle," responded Lord Clandon, "I met my unfortunate brother; and he——"

"Not a syllable, Hugh!" interrupted the Duke sternly, "not a syllable! I know your generous heart—I know how you love your brother: but if you dare plead for him, I quit the room this instant—or you shall quit the house for ever! I know that they will tell me they are innocent. Guilt always proclaims its innocence; and the more damning it is, the bolder is its effrontery. Hugh, not another word!"—and thus speaking, the Duke of Marchmont walked forth from the room.

Lord Clandon remained there for a few minutes after his uncle had left him; and then he hastily ascended towards the drawing-room. But on the landing he met Mrs. Bailey, who was descending from her own chamber, ready dressed as if for a journey.

"Oh, dear me, my lord," she said, quivering with a nervous trepidation: "what a dreadful thing! The Duke has ordered me to take Eliza away as soon as my travelling-carriage can be got in readiness——"

"And what else did he say?" asked Hugh eagerly.

"Nothing," responded Mrs. Bailey: "nor would he allow me to put in a single word. I hope, my lord, you have not told his Grace all that I said to you the other day?"

"Not for worlds, Mrs. Bailey!—not for worlds, my dear madam!" rejoined Clandon hastily. "And for heaven's sake, if the Duke questions you in any shape or form before you take your departure,—beware how you breathe a syllable of those circumstances which you mentioned to me!"

"I shall take very good care not to do that," answered the lady, still trembling with nervous agitation. "Oh, what a shocking thing!—and I who hadn't my smelling-bottle at the moment I heard of it!"

"Hush!—footsteps are ascending!" said Lord Clandon.

In a few moments the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance,—his demeanour now sternly and haughtily composed, but with an evidently forced rigidity of the features; and his countenance was ghastly pale.

"My dear madam," he said, approaching Mrs. Bailey and taking her hand, "I am grieved that it should become your duty, as my wife's only remaining relative upon her own side, to bear her away from a house which ceases to be her home. I thank you for the readiness with which you have complied with my request. Take the guilty woman with you: in a few days my solicitors shall communicate to you what my intentions are. Farewell, madam. Hugh, attend upon Mrs. Bailey to her carriage——and see that *she* accompanies her!"

With these words, the Duke was moving abruptly away,—when, as a thought struck him, he turned and said, "If she goes down upon her knees, Hugh, to entreat and implore that you will bring a conciliatory message to me, I command you, on pain of my unforgiving displeasure—on pain of my eternal wrath—to refuse compliance!"

He then passed into the nearest room, locking the door behind him; so that the quick turning of the key reached the ears of Mrs. Bailey and Lord Clandon, who remained upon the landing. In a few minutes one of Eliza's maids descended from above; and presenting a letter to Mrs. Bailey, said, "Her Grace entreats, ma'am, that you will hand this to the Duke."

"Indeed, poor soul," cried Mrs. Bailey, "I can do nothing of the sort: for the Duke will neither hear nor see anybody on her Grace's behalf. Unless indeed your lordship," she added, addressing Clandon, "would make one last effort——"

"Yes, yes—I will!" responded Hugh. "Yes—I will! It is a sacred duty—and even though I risk my uncle's displeasure, I will perform it."

He took the letter, and hastened to knock at the door of the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself. His Grace demanded from within who it was; and when Lord Clandon answered, the door was at once opened. The uncle and nephew remained closeted there together for about ten minutes, while Mrs. Bailey and the lady's-maid waited on the landing.

"How is her Grace now?" inquired the former:

"and why was it she begged I would not come into her room a little while back?"

"Her Grace, ma'am," replied the maid, with a saddened countenance, "looks as if she were ten years older than she was an hour back. But it was with a strange calmness she sat herself down to write that letter which Lord Clandon has so kindly taken in to the Duke. Heaven send that its contents may move his Grace! It was only because my poor mistress was occupied on that letter, that she could not see you. Oh! ma'am, her Grace may have been weak and imprudent—but it is hard to believe her guilty!"

Mrs. Bailey,—being well acquainted with all Eliza's earlier history, and knowing how deeply she had loved Bertram—besides being a woman whose notions of the better side of humanity had been warped, if not actually spoilt by the frivolities of fashionable life,—really did believe in her own heart that Eliza was completely guilty; and she could not help shaking her head ominously in response to the maid's expressed doubt on the subject. The countenance of the maid herself therefore fell suddenly as she beheld that look; and her own previously wavering opinion settled into a conviction unfavourable to the unfortunate Eliza.

At this moment Lord Clandon came forth from the apartment, where he had been closeted with the Duke; and his looks showed that his mission had proved unsuccessful.

"His Grace read the letter," he said, in a low deep voice. "After much trouble I persuaded him that *this* was at least an act of justice which he owed towards the Duchess. But his opinion is not to be moved—nor his resolve shaken. His commands are that with the least possible delay the Duchess is to leave the house."

The maid, with a sorrowful countenance, ascended the stairs, followed by Mrs. Bailey; and they entered the boudoir, where Eliza was pacing to and fro in a state of mind which may be more readily imagined than described. Another of her maids had remained with her; and this one was standing aside, following with mournful looks the form of her mistress as she thus paced to and fro. Eliza did indeed seem as if she had received a most fearful shock: her countenance was pale as death—her eyes were haggard—her look was as careworn as if she had passed through a dozen years of unceasing, ineffable sorrow. The instant the door opened, her eyes, glistening feverishly with uneasiness and suspense, were flung upon those who entered; and Mrs. Bailey hastening forward, said, "O Eliza, how could you——"

"Madam," interrupted the Duchess, all her trepidation settling down in a moment into the most dignified calmness,—"I see that you believe me guilty: but I am innocent!"

"Well, my dear," answered Mrs. Bailey, "I most sincerely hope you are—but of course you know best."

"My letter, Jane?" said the Duchess, turning proudly and indignantly away from her relative, and addressing herself to the maid who had followed Mrs. Bailey into the room: "has it been sent to his Grace?"—and now again there was the feverish glitter of suspense in her eyes as she awaited the response.

"The Duke," Mrs. Bailey hastened to interject, "positively forbade any one to bring him either letter or message; and he locked himself in a room——"

"My letter, Jane?" ejaculated the Duchess, now quivering visibly with impatience—but disdaining to take any farther notice of Mrs. Bailey, since this lady had shown that she believed in her guilt.

"Please your Grace," answered Jane, "Lord Clandon kindly took charge of the letter—his lordship was very much affected—and he was closeted with his Grace for nearly a quarter of an hour. But, my lady——"

"Enough, Jane!" said the Duchess, her marble features suddenly becoming fixed and rigid in the last stage of despair. "I understand you. The Duke believes me not. I therefore leave his house at once. But before I go, let me call God to witness that if I have been thoughtless—if I have been weak—if I have been imprudent—I have not been guilty!"

"O Eliza—my dear Eliza!" said Mrs. Bailey, still full of a nervous trepidation; "pray don't call God's name in vain!"

"Woman!" ejaculated Eliza fiercely, as she turned abruptly round upon her relative; "do you dare stand forward as my accuser?"—then, as Mrs. Bailey staggered back, frightened and aghast, the Duchess went on to say, "I will not accept a home from you! You cannot lay your hand upon your heart and say that you are sensible of no wrongs towards me. You know what I mean! I could curse you, were it not that I should involve the memory of my deceased parent in the same frightful malediction. If I were guilty——but God is my witness that I am not——how much of that guilt would be attributable to your detestable machinations! Begone!—remain not here another moment in my presence!"

Mrs. Bailey,—frightened to death lest Eliza should enter into the fullest explanations relative to the past, and thereby seriously compromise her,—hurried from the room, and rushed down stairs in a condition of bewildered terror.

"Where is the Duchess?" asked Lord Clandon: but as Mrs. Bailey sped past him, not knowing what she was about, he hurried after her. "Do tell me, my dear madam," he continued, in a voice full of anxiety and uneasiness, "what has occurred?"

"Don't ask me, my lord! don't ask me, I beseech you!" she ejaculated. "To be abused, and reviled, and taunted, after I helped to make her a Duchess—it is perfectly shocking!"

"Shocking indeed," said Lord Clandon, who was now enabled to comprehend pretty well what had taken place. "But are you going without her?" he asked, as Mrs. Bailey rushed through the hall to her carriage, which was waiting at the entrance.

"Yes, my lord!—pray let me go! I can assure you I have had quite enough of Oaklands."

"But the Duke's commands are that you should take the Duchess with you."

"The Duchess will not come—and thank heaven that she won't!" rejoined Mrs. Bailey, who was all in a flutter of mingled anger and affright; and without even waiting to be handed to the carriage, she scrambled up into it as best she could.

Lord Clandon bowed courteously — and the equipage drove away. Then he stood irresolute for a few moments how to act. Mrs. Bailey had taken her departure, leaving the Duchess behind; and the Duke's orders were consequently disobeyed. Hugh decided, after a short deliberation with himself, upon ascending to his uncle's apartment to obtain farther instructions.

Let us now see what in the meanwhile had taken place in Eliza's chamber. So soon as Mrs. Bailey had fled thence in the manner already described, the Duchess of Marchmont, sinking down from her temporary excitement, into that blank, dead, unnatural calmness which indicated utter despair,—said to her maids, "Give me my bonnet—my shawl—my gloves—and I will take my departure."

"Shall I order a carriage for your Grace?" inquired Jane, adown whose cheeks the tears were trickling, although in her heart she believed the Duchess guilty notwithstanding her solemn protestations to the contrary.

"No," answered Eliza: "I will depart on foot. Portionless and penniless was I received as a wife: portionless and penniless will I go forth as a discarded and branded creature."

The two maids threw themselves weeping at Eliza's feet, conjuring her not to carry this resolve into execution: but she was firm—and in that very firmness she issued her commands in a voice that seemed more than decisive: it was even stern. The maids rose, and in profound silence gave her the things she asked for. When she was dressed for departure, her looks softened towards them; and she said in a tremulous voice, "Your kindness, my dear girls, touches me deeply: for, Oh! this is indeed a trial in the midst of which such kindness is to be felt. Farewell! Trouble not yourselves for me. Remain here until you are sought out and questions are put to you as to the mode of my departure. Then say that as I brought nothing with me of my own when the Duke took me as a wife, so I bear nothing away with me. Tell him likewise that in my writing-desk he will find the papers to which I alluded in the letter just now sent him. And once again, farewell."

With these last words—and not trusting herself to fling another look upon the two weeping damsels—the Duchess abruptly quitted the chamber. Seeking the private staircase, she descended it quickly, and passed out of the side-door into the grounds. No one observed her egress: and the two maids remained together in the chamber, weeping bitterly at the mournful circumstances under which they were thus suddenly deprived of a mistress whom they loved, and whose conduct had been uniformly kind towards them.

Meanwhile Lord Clandon, as the reader will recollect, had returned to the apartment wherein the Duke had locked himself,—his nephew's object now being to report that Mrs. Bailey had gone without the Duchess, and to obtain farther instructions. In about ten minutes Lord Clandon issued forth again; and summoning a footman, desired him to go and give immediate instructions to have the plain chariot gotten in readiness. He then ascended to the room which Eliza had so recently left—and knocked gently at the door. The summons was at once answered by Jane, down whose cheeks the tears of affliction were still flowing fast.

"I wish to speak a few words to her Grace," said Clandon, the expression of whose countenance was deeply mournful.

"Her Grace, my lord, is gone," answered Jane, sobbing violently..

"Gone?" ejaculated Clandon, in astonishment. "What mean you? No equipage has departed——"

"Her Grace would not have a carriage," rejoined the lady's-maid: "she is gone away on foot."

"On foot?" echoed Clandon, with continued amazement. "But where? whither? What purpose has her Grace in view?"

"All this, my lord, I know not," answered Jane. "Her Grace bade us farewell—and departed, as I have told you."

Lord Clandon descended the stairs slowly, and in profound mental deliberation. Again he knocked at the door of the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself; but this time the key turned not in the lock. From within however the Duke demanded in a voice which sounded irritable and stern, "Who is it? Wherefore am I thus incessantly disturbed?"

"It is I, uncle," answered Lord Clandon. "Her Grace has taken her departure——"

"Enough! Trouble me no more! Leave me, I insist!" exclaimed the Duke from within. "Give orders, Hugh, that no one comes to me. I would be alone—entirely alone!"

Lord Clandon dared not speak another word; and hastening away from the door, he was about to summon a domestic, when he beheld his own valet Travers ascending the stairs.

"Go and counter-order the travelling-carriage," said Clandon, "which a few minutes back I commanded to be got in readiness."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet: and he hurried off to execute his master's instructions.

It was now six o'clock in the evening; and the guests were all grouped in the drawing-room, discussing in whispers as much as they knew of what had taken place. Some were suggesting the propriety of immediately ordering their carriages and taking their departure, as their presence under existing circumstances might be regarded as an indelicate intrusion. But others recommended that no precipitate steps should be taken, as after all it might transpire that the Duchess had been wrongly judged, and a complete reconciliation might take place between herself and the Duke: for they knew not that Eliza had already left Oaklands.

In the midst of these whisperings, Lord Clandon entered the drawing-room; and the guests perceived at once by his countenance that something terribly decisive had taken place. He expressed his regret that anything should have occurred to mar the pleasure which had hitherto prevailed at the mansion; and he delicately yet plainly intimated that an irreparable breach had arisen between his uncle and the Duchess—that the latter had left the mansion—and that the former, overwhelmed with affliction, had shut himself up in the solitude of his apartment. The guests longed to hear more explicit details: but good taste prevented them from putting any questions; and they now saw that there was nothing for them to do but to order their carriages and separate to their respective homes. As a matter of courtesy, Lord Clandon requested them to wait for dinner, which would be shortly served up: but this, under the circumstances, was a mere ceremonial act of politeness, which was of course declined. Immediate orders were issued to have trunks packed up and carriages gotten in readiness: the commands were promptly obeyed—and by seven o'clock on this memorable evening the guests had all taken their departure.

Lord Clandon now hurried off towards the village where he had promised to meet his brother, and which was about a mile distant. Less than a quarter of an hour's rapid walk brought him to the tavern in the village; and on inquiring for the Hon. Mr. Bertram Vivian, he was at once shown into the little parlour where his brother, with feverish anxiety and harrowing suspense, was awaiting his arrival. Very nearly three hours had elapsed since they parted in the grounds of the mansion, and when Bertram so passionately implored Hugh to hasten away and assure their uncle of his wife's innocence. During this interval, which had seemed an entire age, the unfortunate Bertram had endured agonies of mind which, if spread over whole centuries, and portioned out as the lot of millions of human beings, would even thus in each infinitesimal part have been excruciatingly intolerable—but which, when condensed into the space of three hours, and aggregated as the burden which a single individual had to bear, were overpowering and soul-crushing beyond the capacity of language to describe. The first glance which Lord Clandon threw upon his brother, as he entered the little parlour of the village inn, showed him how fearfully Bertram must have suffered.

"What tidings, Hugh?" inquired Bertram, literally gasping with the fever of suspense, and with the horrible misgivings which Lord Clandon's melancholy expression of countenance was but too well calculated to inspire.

"Alas! nothing good," was the elder brother's response.

"Nothing good!" murmured the unhappy Bertram, his features indicative of despair. "But what has occurred? Tell me, Hugh!" he exclaimed, with feverish haste. "Did you assure our uncle——"

"My dear Bertram," rejoined Lord Clandon, taking his brother's hand and pressing it, "I did all that I could—but in vain!"

"And my letter?" cried Bertram: "has not the Duke had my letter?"

"Your letter?" exclaimed Clandon, in astonishment.

"But now I bethink me," Bertram went on to say rapidly, "it could not have reached the house before you must have left. I despatched it by a boy half-an-hour back. I was mad—frenzied—goaded to desperation! The time was passing, and you came not——I knew not what to do——my anxiety was intolerable——"

"And what said you to the Duke in your letter?" asked Lord Clandon.

"I scarcely recollect," replied Bertram. "I tell you that I was mad when I wrote it——I am mad still! My God, and she innocent! But where is she, Hugh? what has become of her?"

"She has left Oaklands," answered Lord Clandon. "First of all she was to depart with Mrs. Bailey——"

"And she has left?" exclaimed Bertram wildly: "she has left? She has lost her home—she who is innocent! Oh, wretch that I am!—it is I that have caused this fearful havoc of feelings—this frightful desolation of circumstances!"—and the miserable young man wrung his hands bitterly. "But she has left, you say?" he almost immediately added. "Whither has she gone?"

"I know not," responded Clandon. "Mrs. Bailey departed without her; and the unfortunate Eliza quitted the house on foot—alone——"

"Good heavens! is this possible?" ejaculated Bertram: and the wildness of frensy was in his eyes. "Eliza gone forth alone—unattended—on foot——an outcast—a wanderer! Oh, it is intolerable!"—and snatching up his hat, he rushed madly to the door.

"Whither would you go, Bertram?" cried Lord Clandon, seizing his brother forcibly by the arm to hold him back.

"Whither would I go?" ejaculated the almost maddened young man. "To find her whom my insensate passion has ruined! to console her, if consolation be possible—to implore her pardon—to adopt means to prove her innocence——"

"But, Bertram——"

"Detain me not, Hugh! detain me not!"—and thus speaking with increasing frenzy of feelings and rabid vehemence of manner, Bertram rushed forth from the village inn.

Lord Clandon hurried out to the threshold of the front door: but his brother had already disappeared from his view.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CATASTROPHE.

About a quarter of an hour after Lord Clandon had left the mansion to keep his appointment with Bertram, a letter, addressed to the Duke of Marchmont, was brought by a boy and delivered to the hall-porter. The boy, who was already paid for his trouble, tarried not for any farther recompense—but hurried away the moment he had acquitted himself of his commission. That was the letter which Bertram had sent: but the address on the outside, as well as the contents within, were written in a hand so changed by the violent agitation of the writer, that no one, however familiar with his usual style of penmanship, would for a moment have suspected that it was his own. The hall-porter gave the letter to a footman,—who, proceeding up-stairs, knocked at the door of the apartment in which the Duke of Marchmont still remained.

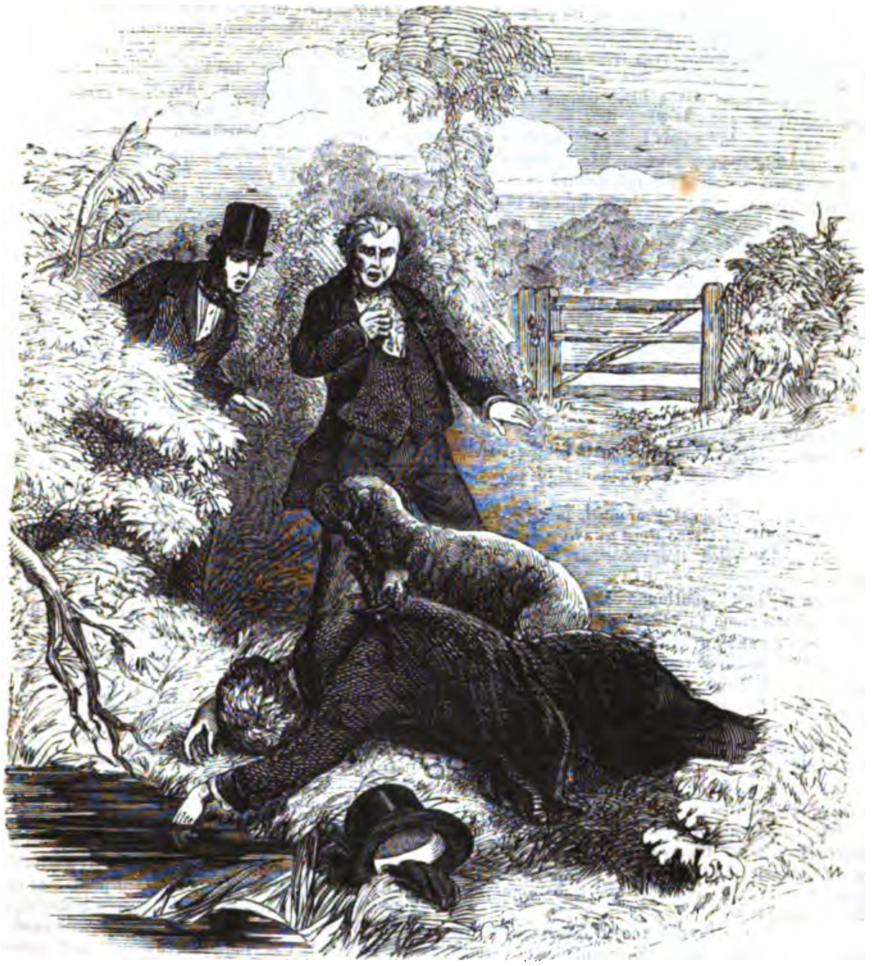
"Who is there?" demanded the nobleman from within; and his voice was half stern, half passionate. "I expressly ordered——"

"A letter, my lord," responded the footman, trembling with alarm.

"From whom?" demanded the Duke.

"I know not, my lord," rejoined the domestic. "It is in a strange hand——"

The Duke opened the door, and received the letter. The footman, as he caught a momentary



glimpse of his master's countenance, saw that it was deadly pale, with the traces of all strongly wrought feelings upon it. Hastily closing the door again, the Duke looked at the address; and not recognising the writing, opened the letter: but the instant his eye settled on the first words of its contents, he dashed it upon the carpet, and trampled it under foot. Ashamed of himself, the very next instant, for this impotent manifestation of vindictive fury, the Duke of Marchmont picked the letter up; and prompted by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to see what Bertram could possibly have to adduce in the face of evidence which his Grace regarded as so decisive, he sat down and read the letter through. It consisted chiefly of broken sentences, solemn oaths, sacred adjurations, —all attesting the innocence of the Duchess; and there were some incoherent allusions to a long-existing love between them, as well as to a cruel deception practised by her deceased father and Mrs. Bailey in order to make her the Duke's wife; so that a gleam of light began to dawn in unto the comprehension of Eliza's husband.

"Good heavens!" he said to himself, with a feeling of horror at the lengths to which he had gone, "if it be indeed true that in a moment of weakness, and under the influence of sorrow's agony at the idea of parting, Bertram should have caught her in his arms, but that she was innocent! Yet no—I cannot think it! I was prepared for protestations of innocence; and I even said that the deeper the guilt, the more impassioned its denial. No, no: they are guilty—this viper of a nephew—that wanton of a woman! But their love of other times—and that deception practised on her——"

And the Duke was staggered. He pressed his hand to his brow: he would have given worlds to discover that the wife whom he had loved so fondly, and of whom he had been so proud, was really innocent: his soul yearned to think her so—his heart bled at the idea of its possibility, and at his own implacable harshness. An idea struck him. He went forth from the room, and inquired for Lord Clandon: but he was informed that Hugh had gone out a little time previously. Then the Duke ordered Jane, her Grace's principal lady's-maid, to be sent to him in the drawing-room. During the few minutes which elapsed ere the young woman made her appearance, the Duke of Marchmont composed his looks into an expression of cold and severe dignity: for he was too proud to display before others all he felt.

"Jane," he said, as the maid entered the room with a sorrowful countenance, and with the traces of weeping still upon it, "your mistress has taken her departure?"

"Yes, my lord," was the response. "Her Grace was very, very unhappy——"

"And whither has she gone?" interrupted the Duke.

"I know not, my lord."

"But the instructions she gave to the coachman? You doubtless attended her to the carriage——"

"My lord," rejoined the maid, tears bursting forth afresh, "her Grace went away on foot."

"On foot?" cried the nobleman, in astonishment.

"Yes, my lord," continued Jane. "Her Grace said that she came to you without a carriage, and she would go away as portionless——"

"Ah!" murmured the Duke: and then his eyes were earnestly fixed upon the maid, as if his soul experienced an avidity for whatsoever words of explanation might next come from her lips.

"Her Grace called God to witness her innocence," proceeded the maid. "Ah, my lord! it would be a shocking thing to fancy that human nature is so bad to take such an oath——"

But the young woman stopped short: for she recollected Mrs. Bailey's words and manner—and she trembled at the idea of pledging herself to a belief in the innocence of one who might after all be guilty.

"And what else did the Duchess say?" demanded the Duke, with the petulance of feverish impatience.

"Her Grace bade me tell your lordship," responded Jane, "that you would find in her writing-desk the several documents to which her letter to your Grace made allusion—I mean the letter which Lord Clandon was good enough to take in to your Grace."

"Ah, that letter! I did not——But no matter!" and the Duke hastened abruptly from the room.

He ascended to his wife's boudoir: he found the writing-desk—he knew it to be the one which her father had left behind him, and which he himself had placed in Eliza's hands a short time after the funeral. It was unlocked: for the Duchess had purposely left it so. The Duke drew forth its contents; and Bertram's letters to the late Captain Lacey, which he found therein, gave him a complete insight into, all those byegone matters to which his unhappy young nephew's agitated communication from the village had merely made rapid and almost incoherent allusions.

The Duke was astounded: a veil fell from his eyes—and in a moment he comprehended the real meaning of that strange conduct which Bertram and Eliza had observed towards each other during the first few days of the young gentleman's visit to Oaklands. And he, the Duke, had purposely thrown them together! he had studied to place them on a friendly footing! Ah, if he were dishonoured, he had indeed, though unconsciously, been the author of that dishonour. But what in his heart he had for the last quarter of an hour been wishing, and yearning, and craving might come to pass, he now more than half believed. Was it not indeed possible—nay, more, was it not probable, that Eliza had been only weak, not guilty—and that Bertram's vindication was true, when it declared that under the influence of irrepressible feelings—not being at the moment master of himself—he had caught her in his arms? The longer the Duke thought of this, the more was he inclined to put faith in Bertram's statement. The very circumstances attending the departure of his wife, as he had just heard them from Jane's lips, seemed to be tinctured with a dignity far more compatible with conscious innocence than with a sense of guilt.

"O Eliza! O Eliza!" groaned the unhappy Duke, in the mingled anguish and reviving fondness of his heart; "if I have wronged you——good heavens, if I have wronged you! And that I have, I fear——nay, I am well nigh convinced. You sought not to be on intimate terms with Bertram; you were cold and distant towards him. Your demeanour was, under all circumstances, that which it ought to have been. And I threw you together—I forced you into each other's society—I left you alone together!——Ah! it was natural you should speak of the past—victims that you had both been made to a hideous deception! Yes, Eliza, you are innocent! Your weakness I forgive—you shall come to my arms again—and it is I who will on my knees sue at your feet for pardon!"

The Duke rushed forth from the boudoir in a state of mind bordering on frenzy. All his habitual dignity was forgotten—all his wonted pride was as naught, under the influence of the strong feelings which now possessed him. He reached the landing whence the drawing-room opened: and there he abruptly encountered Lord Clandon, who had just hurried back from the village after the interview with his brother.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Duke, as if the presence of his elder nephew suddenly reminded him of things which, in the previous whirl of his conflicting, distracting thoughts, he had utterly lost sight of. "Come hither:"—and the Duke abruptly passed into the drawing-room, followed by Lord Clandon.

Their interview did not last above ten minutes: but what its nature was, we have at present no means of describing. Suffice it to say that at the expiration of this brief interview, the door opened as abruptly as when the Duke entered that room;—and his Grace came forth. Descending to the hall, he said in a quick excited manner to the lacqueys, whom he found there, "Let all the male domestics disperse themselves over the neighbourhood, in search of the Duchess. If her Grace be found, tell her that I—her husband—have wronged her——"

Ejaculations of joy burst forth from the lips of all who had heard this announcement of Eliza's innocence: for her natural goodness and her affably condescending manners had endeared her to the entire household of which she was so late the mistress.

"Yes," continued the Duke, his voice swelling with the excitement of his feelings, "let her Grace be told that I have wronged her—that I beseech her to return—and that she will be received with open arms! Disperse yourselves all about—enter every house, cottage, or hut, where it is possible that your mistress may have taken refuge. Depart, I say—and a hundred guineas for him who finds her ladyship! I also shall go forth in the hope of discovering my wrongly banished wife!"

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont put on his hat and rushed forth from the mansion. As he descended the steps, his favourite dog—a great bull-mastiff, which has been before alluded to—came leaping up in joy at beholding its master.

"Come, Pluto!" exclaimed the Duke. "You seem to understand, faithful dog, that I am bent on something of importance!"

Meanwhile the word had been passed rapidly through the mansion that, by some means or another, the Duke had become convinced of the innocence of the Duchess—that her Grace was to be sought out—and that a hundred guineas would be the reward of him who might discover her retreat. To no hearts did this announcement carry a more real joy, than to those of the two lady's-maids; and Jane, embracing her fellow-servant, murmured, with tears of happiness streaming down her cheeks, "She will return to us—our beloved mistress will return to us! God forgive me for having suspected her!"

All the male servants of the household sallied forth, and dispersed themselves about in every direction, in search of the Duchess. Lord Clandon likewise hastened on the mission,—vowing that he would add fifty guineas to the sum already promised by his uncle as the reward of the successful searcher.

The shades of evening had already begun to gather over the earth before this expedition was undertaken: but when night came, the moon appeared upon the canopy of heaven, in company with myriads of glimmering stars. Hours passed—but no one returned from the search until after midnight. Then, one by one, the domestics began to re-appear at Oaklands; and each successive arrival was accompanied by the announcement of non-success. It was near one o'clock in the morning when Lord Clandon came back: he likewise had to intimate failure. He inquired for the Duke: but his Grace had not yet re-appeared; and Lord Clandon resolved to sit up for his return.

It was one o'clock when the Duke of Marchmont, followed by his faithful dog, reached his mansion again. His inquiries had been as fruitless as those of all the others: indeed not the slightest intelligence was obtained by any one relative to the Duchess. A horrible idea seemed to pervade the generality of the household,—to the effect that she had committed suicide: but no one ventured to breathe such a surmise to the Duke—and it did not appear that he entertained it. Perchance he knew Eliza's natural firmness of character too well, to suspect for a moment that she could have perpetrated self-destruction—especially because, if really innocent—as he now felt convinced she was—she would cling to existence in the hope that her guiltlessness might be made apparent and the stain wiped away from her character.

"I shall go forth again," said the Duke to his domestics, who were assembled in the hall: "my weary limbs shall not press a couch this night, unless I obtain some clue to the retreat of the Duchess."

Then he questioned the domestics, one after the other, as to the particular neighbourhoods in which they had been; and it resulted that there was a little hamlet about two miles distant which was left unvisited.

"Thither will I go," said the Duke, hope appearing upon his countenance.

Several of the domestics volunteered to accompany his Grace; while all the others proposed to set off again and renew the search.

"No," said the Duke, thanking them all with a look, "you have done enough for to-night: it is my will that you retire to your chambers and seek the rest of which you all stand so much in need. If the morrow should dawn and no good intelligence have been in the interval obtained, we will adopt other means to accomplish our purpose. Go you therefore to your rooms."

"And you, my lord," interjected several voices, "stand in need of rest."

"No," responded the Duke: "I could not sleep, even if I sought my couch. I will go forth again. It is I who, alas! have done the mischief: it is my duty to effect its earliest reparation. Retire."

"Lord Clandon is sitting up," suggested one of the servants. "Shall I inform his lordship that your Grace is here?"

"No," responded the Duke imperatively: "I have not time for farther discourse. Retire to your chambers, I say—and I will go forth alone."

As he thus spoke, the Duke waved his hand in a manner which showed that he meant to be obeyed—though his looks again expressed thankfulness for the sympathy exhibited by his dependants. He went forth; and while the servants for the most part repaired at once to their chambers, others proceeded to secure the doors and shutters previously to seeking their own rooms: while Travers hastened to inform his master, Lord Clandon, of all that the Duke had said—for Travers was present in the hall during the brief scene which we have just described.

"His Grace should have suffered me to accompany him," exclaimed Lord Clandon: "he will weary himself to a degree that may bring on illness. But as it is, I shall retire to rest; and see that you call me early, Travers, so that I may get on horseback and renew the search after the Duchess."

Travers promised to obey his master's instructions; and having attended Lord Clandon to his chamber, proceeded to his own room a few minutes afterwards.

As early as six o'clock in the morning—and therefore after only a few hours' repose—the greater portion of the domestics were up and dressed at Oaklands. Leachley, the Duke's valet, reported that his master had not as yet returned; and expressions of uneasiness passed from lip to lip. Several domestics meeting each other in the hall, were about to decide in which different directions they should issue forth—not merely in search of their lost mistress, but now likewise in search of their master also,—when a strange sound, like a low continuous moaning howl, coming from without, reached their ears. None of the doors of the mansion had as yet been opened: the hall-porter, an old man, having sat up so late, had overslept himself. The domestics listened—the sounds continued—and in a few moments they were interrupted by a bark, but low and feeble as the moaning howl itself had been.

"It is a dog!" ejaculated one.

"It is Pluto, I am almost certain!" cried another.

"Let us get the keys from the porter," exclaimed a third: and a general excitement prevailed; for the idea had arisen simultaneously in every mind that there was something wrong—but what it was, no one could conceive, and no conjecture was volunteered.

The keys were procured from the hall-porter's room: the front door was opened—and Pluto crawled painfully into the hall. He was feebly wagging his tail, as if in satisfaction at having thus obtained admittance at last: but he was bloodstained in several places—and his eyes, usually so bright and intelligent, were glazing as if in death. He carried something in his mouth; and on creeping into the hall, he did not sink down, though evidently in an exhausted, if not a dying state—but dragged himself painfully from the feet of one domestic to another. He looked up at each too, in a sort of piteously entreating manner: it was evident that if the faithful and intelligent animal had the power of speech, he would have told some tale.

"The poor dog has been wounded," ejaculated several voices; and looks of horror were exchanged: for the previous misgiving which had smitten the domestics, appeared all in a moment to have strengthened into the conviction that there had been some accident or foul play during the past night, and of which their master was the victim:—else wherefore had the dog come back alone?

"But what has he in his mouth?" asked one.

At this moment Lord Clandon, followed by Travers, made his appearance in the hall.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" he exclaimed, the instant he caught sight of the wounded dog, who now sank down in utter exhaustion, its eyes closing apparently in death. "Where is the Duke?" inquired Clandon, as if smitten with the same terrible idea that had already seized upon the domestics.

"Oh! my lord, we know not," responded Leachley in a mournful voice: "but we dread——"

"What? the Duke has not returned!" ejaculated Clandon. "Oh, my poor uncle!"—and he seemed violently affected. "But what is that which has fallen from Pluto's mouth?"

"It is a piece of cloth," said one of the servants, stooping down and picking it up.

"Ah! evidently torn out of a coat," ejaculated another.

"Good heavens, what does all this mean?" exclaimed a third.

"Something dreadful, I fear," added Leachley, with a shudder.

"Disperse yourselves in every direction!" exclaimed Lord Clandon, powerfully excited. "I will take horse and gallop along the main roads. Travers——Travers, I say! Why, the fellow was here a few moments back!"

Travers was not however in the hall at this moment: and Lord Clandon hastened up to his own chamber, where he found his valet.

The orders he had given to the servants were promptly obeyed: for they scattered themselves in every direction—some singly, others going two together. A horse was presently saddled for the use of Lord Clandon, who was speedily ready to avail himself of it.

The butler and Leachley, the Duke's own valet, went together on the exciting expedition; and they took the road leading to that hamlet which the Duke had set out to visit, as he had stated to the domestics in the middle of the night. It was, as already stated, two miles distant from the mansion; but Leachley and the butler had not proceeded above a few hundred yards, when they heard a dragging noise and a panting, gasping, moaning sound behind. They turned—and beheld the wounded dog. The poor animal, having been forgotten in the hall when the domestics dispersed in such excitement at Lord Clandon's bidding, had dragged himself forth—for he was not quite so near death as his exhausted condition and glazing eyes had seemed to indicate.

"Poor Pluto," said Leachley, caressing the faithful dog.

"See how he looks up," exclaimed the butler, "as if asking us to come on."

"Yes—there is some meaning in those eyes—in those half moaning, half howling sounds!"

"Let us speed onward," said the butler.

The dog now kept in advance: it appeared as if he acquired strength as he went on—as if he were conscious of having some special task to perform, for which all his best energies were put forth. But still continued that prolonged wailing howl—that lugubrious moan which sounded ominous as a death-knell itself on the ears of the butler and Leachley.

On they went—and in proportion as they advanced, Pluto's pace quickened—his moan became more rueful—he kept looking up at the two domestics, as if entreating them to follow on still and not go back. They themselves experienced the appalled sense of men who felt that every step they took was bringing them nearer and nearer to the solution of some horrible mystery. Presently Pluto dashed forward, round a bend in the road—looked back for an instant to see whether the men were following him—and then disappeared from their view.

But a few instants brought the butler and Leachley round that bend—and they at once descried a dark object on the edge of a pond by the road side. Pluto, moaning and whining with all the plaintiveness of a human voice, was crouching near that object. A few instants more—and the two domestics reached the spot. Then what a frightful spectacle met their view! Their master, the Duke of Marchmont, lay dead before their eyes—foully murdered. A dagger, with which the deed was accomplished, remained between the shoulders, where it had been driven deep down. The unfortunate nobleman lay upon his face on the edge of the pond, into the stagnant water of which one of his arms hung down.

For a few moments the butler and Leachley were so horrified at this frightful spectacle, that they were riveted in powerlessness to the spot: but recovering their self-possession after a brief interval, they raised the corpse. Life was extinct: the Duke's countenance was cold as marble: he had evidently been several hours dead.

"Alas, he is no more!" murmured Leachley, tears starting from his eyes.

"No more!" added the butler solemnly: and they gently laid the corpse down again.

And now followed a most affecting scene. The faithful dog had seemed to watch the countenances of the two men, while they raised and sustained the corpse between them,—as if the animal itself entertained some instinctive hope that they might be enabled to recall their master to life. But when their looks told the worst, and those brief sentences were exchanged, Pluto gave one long, low, whining moan—a subdued lugubrious death-howl—and sank down dead by the side of the corpse.

This incident called forth fresh tears from the eyes of the two domestics. In a few minutes—after having surveyed the scene in mournful silence—Leachley drew forth the dagger, and wrapped it up in his pocket-handkerchief. Scarcely was this done, when the quick tramplings of a galloping horse reached their ears; and in a few moments Lord Clandon was upon the spot.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, throwing himself from the horse, and sinking upon his knees by the side of the corpse: "my poor uncle! What fatal accident——"

"Murder, my lord!" said the butler,—"a foul and diabolical murder."

"Murder!" echoed Clandon, starting up with horror depicted on his countenance. "But I behold no wound!"—for the corpse was now lying on its back.

"Here, my lord," said Leachley, "is the fatal weapon:"—and he produced the dagger from his kerchief.

"Bertram's!" cried Clandon, the instant his looks fell upon it.

"Mr. Bertram's?" ejaculated both of the domestics, with a simultaneous start of indescribable horror.

"Did I say Bertram's?" exclaimed Clandon. "No, no—I recall the word——Not for worlds would I impute——No, no—I did not say Bertram's!"

The two domestics exchanged looks of continued horror, but now blended with dismay and grief: for they both felt that Lord Clandon, having in the suddenness of agonized amazement let drop his brother's name in connexion with the dagger, was now generously seeking to recall the word, so as to save that brother from the dread imputation and its consequences.

"I will ride back to the house," said his lordship, "and procure assistance. But no—I should fall from the steed—I have not strength——Go, one of you! It is my duty to remain here, and watch over the corpse of my poor uncle."

Leachley, the deceased nobleman's valet, accordingly mounted the horse, and sped back to the mansion. Most of the male domestics were abroad, searching for their master and mistress: but some few, who had overslept themselves, were still at the house; and of course all the female servants were there. The intelligence which Leachley brought, was but too well calculated to overwhelm all who heard it with consternation and grief. A carriage was speedily gotten in readiness; and Leachley accompanied it back to the spot, where Lord Clandon and the butler had remained in charge of the corpse. This was now placed inside the vehicle, which returned at a mourning pace with its sad burthen to the mansion. It was not till the lapse of some hours that the domestics who had been on the search—including Travers, Lord Clandon's valet—came back to the mansion; and as they returned one by one, it was to hear the afflicting intelligence of the Duke's murder. We should not omit to observe that the remains of poor Pluto were likewise taken to the mansion; and when a veterinary surgeon had examined into the exact nature of the wound of which the faithful animal had died, the body was buried in the garden, in the midst of a parterre of flowers.

On the following day the County Coroner arrived at Oaklands, to hold an inquest over the corpse of the deceased Duke. A jury, consisting of tenant-farmers and of the principal householders of the village, was summoned for the occasion. The butler and Leachley deposed to the discovery of the corpse by the side of the pond. The dagger was produced; and Leachley,—being a conscientious man, and determined to do his duty, no matter at what sacrifice of his own feelings and those of others,—mentioned the circumstance of Lord Clandon's ejaculation of his brother's name the instant the fatal weapon met his eyes. The story in respect to the Duchess and Bertram had already got wind throughout the entire district: and thus the Coroner and Jury, in their own minds, naturally beheld in those incidents enough to strengthen the suspicion that the Duke's younger nephew was indeed the assassin.

Lord Clandon—or, as we ought now properly to style him, the Duke of Marchmont; for such indeed had his uncle's death made him—was compelled to appear before the Coroner. He entered the room where the inquest was held, with a deep sadness upon his countenance; and for the first few minutes his sobs were plainly audible. The Coroner expressed for himself and the Jury the grief which was experienced at enforcing his Grace's attendance under such distressing circumstances: but they intimated that they had a duty to perform, and that it must be accomplished.

The oath being administered to the new Duke of Marchmont the Coroner said, "I am about to put a question which, however painful it may be, your Grace is bound to answer on the sanctity of the oath you have just taken. Does your Grace know to whom this weapon belongs?"

"Am I indeed bound to answer such a question?" inquired Hugh; and he appeared to speak with the greatest difficulty, so that all present compassionated his afflicting position.

"Your Grace must answer," said the Coroner.

"Then if it be so," returned the Duke of Marchmont, in a scarcely audible voice, "I do know that the dagger was the property of—of my unfor——my brother."

"Whose Christian name is Bertram?" said the Coroner interrogatively.

The Duke of Marchmont bowed—groaned audibly—and covered his countenance with his hands.

"When, my lord," inquired the Coroner, after a pause, "did you last see your brother?"

"In the evening of the day before yesterday," responded the Duke,—"in the village of Oaklands."

"And in what state of mind was he at the time, my lord?" asked the Coroner.

"He was much excited," responded the Duke: "for circumstances had occurred——But doubtless the rumour has reached your ears? My poor brother protested his innocence——"

"And did your Grace leave him in the village?" asked the Coroner.

"No," returned Hugh. "I sought to comfort and console him: but when he learnt that the Duchess had left the mansion, he burst away from me in a sort of frenzy. Oh! I fear that his brain was turned—that madness had seized upon it—— But still—still I cannot bring myself to think for a moment that he would have been guilty of this crime!"

"We shall not trouble your Grace any farther," said the Coroner.

The Duke of Marchmont rose from his seat—bowed to the assemblage—and passed slowly from the room, followed by the sincerest sympathies of all present.

The landlord of the village inn was next examined as a witness. He deposed to the fact of Bertram having passed about three hours at the tavern in the afternoon and evening of the day preceding the night of the murder—that he was violently excited the whole time—and that he had rushed away in the frenzied state of which his brother had just spoken. Two of the housemaids belonging to the mansion, were next examined in succession; and their statement was to the effect that while arranging the chamber occupied by Bertram during his stay at Oaklands, they had seen the dagger lying amongst a few other curiosities, which, as they understood, Bertram had brought with him from the United States. The man-servant who had specially attended upon Bertram during his visit, was the next witness; and he deposed to the fact that Bertram had shown him the dagger, explaining at the time that it had been long in the possession of some celebrated Indian Chief who died a few months previous to Bertram's departure from Washington. The dagger, we should observe, was of very peculiar workmanship, and once seen, could not possibly have been mistaken.

Witnesses were now examined to relate the particulars in respect to the dog. It had been found that Pluto was mortally wounded by a pistol-bullet: but the weapon itself had not been found, either in the pond or in the neighbourhood—so that it was tolerably evident the assassin had taken it away with him. The cloth which the dog had brought in his mouth, was a fragment evidently torn from the skirt of a surtout coat; and it was therefore supposed that the faithful animal had flown at the murderer of his master—in doing which he had received the fatal bullet. It was farther shown that Bertram had on a black surtout coat when he left Oaklands after the scene with the Duke and Eliza.

The evidence being now complete, the Coroner proceeded to sum up. In alluding to the circumstance of the dagger, he said that it had been incontestibly proved that the weapon belonged to Bertram; and that the Jury, with this fact before them, would have to weigh well whether, under all the circumstances, it was Bertram's hand which committed the deed—or whether some other person had obtained possession of that dagger with the foulest of purposes. The Coroner remarked that it was certainly extraordinary that Bertram should have had the dagger about him at the time when he was walking with the Duchess and when the incident occurred that compelled him to fly from Oaklands. None of the witnesses had been able to throw any light upon this point,—such for instance as proving that the dagger was still in Bertram's room at the time of his flight—or on the other hand, that they missed it from the room. Certain it was the dagger had dealt the murderous blow; and it was for the Jury to say whether the hand of Bertram or that of an unknown assassin had wielded the weapon. Having commented upon all other parts of the evidence, the Coroner left the matter in the hands of the Jury.

The deliberation was not long; and its unanimous result was a verdict of "Wilful Murder against Bertram Vivian, now Lord Clandon."

When the tragic circumstances which thus occurred at Oaklands, became spread abroad over the United Kingdom by means of the public journals, the usual excitement lasted for a time—and then began to die away. Warrants were issued for Bertram's apprehension—a reward was offered by the Secretary of State—advertisements were inserted in the newspapers—but all to no effect: the accused was not to be found. And Eliza? Nothing was heard of her. The natural inference therefore was that Bertram and the Duchess of Marchmont had fled together to some far distant clime—there to enjoy their illicit love and to escape, the one from the odium, and the other from the consequences of the fearful deed of turpitude which had been committed.

CHAPTER X.

DUCAL RECEPTIONS.

EIGHTEEN years (within a few months) had elapsed since the tragic occurrences at Oaklands,—eighteen years, during which not the slightest intelligence had ever been received of the accused Bertram and the missing Eliza.

Hugh Duke of Marchmont was now in his forty-third year: and that interval had necessarily made some change in his personal appearance. His hair, of such jetty darkness when we first introduced him to our readers, was now undergoing its first change towards gray: harsh lines, telling of strong passions and of somewhat irregular pursuits, were traced upon his forehead and in the corners of his eyes. His countenance was thin and pale—his features had grown angular—but their expression was that of a cold haughty severity.

He had married about two years after the tragedy at Oaklands suddenly put him in possession of the title and estates of Marchmont: but no issue had blessed the union. The lady whom the Duke had espoused, was a young creature of only sixteen at the time of the marriage; and fifteen years having elapsed since the solemnisation of those nuptials, she was consequently now thirty-one. For some time the Duke had earnestly hoped to have an heir to his title and possessions: but as year after year passed and the hope remained unfulfilled, Hugh gradually conceived an aversion towards his young and beautiful wife. This aversion did not at first display itself in any overt acts towards the Duchess: but in proportion as it increased, the Duke grew all the less careful in concealing it—until the unfortunate Duchess could no longer blind herself to the growing indifference of her husband,—an indifference that was merging into downright hate. At last the Duke of Marchmont separated so far from his wife that they occupied distinct rooms,—though still continuing to live beneath the same roof, and preserving, when in society and before the world, all the outward decencies which husband and wife are bound to maintain towards each other. The Duchess was not the less virtually and in reality neglected,—the Duke seldom dining at home, but seeking his own pleasures in quarters that were most agreeable to him. Though he had been extravagant and improvident in the earlier part of his life, and was indeed overwhelmed with debts at the period he succeeded to the title and domains of Marchmont,—he had, since that accession, lived within his income: but then his income was ample enough to minister to all the wants and wishes of even the most pleasure-seeking individual.

The town-mansion occupied by the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont, was one of the handsomest and most extensive in Belgrave Square. It had lately been refurnished in a sumptuous manner: the picture-gallery contained some of the finest works of the old masters: all the appointments of the palatial residence were indicative of great wealth and a luxurious taste. Throughout the entire arrangements the voice of the Duke himself was autocratic,—the Duchess not being allowed to interfere. Neither did she seek to do so: her disposition was gentle, meek, and submissive: her lot was an unhappy one—but she endeavoured to bear it with all becoming resignation, and sedulously avoided the aggravation of its hardship by any manifestation of a will of her own in opposition to that of her imperious husband.

It was in the beginning of June, 1847, that the scene occurred which we are about to narrate. The time-piece in one of the elegantly furnished apartments at Marchmont House, had just proclaimed the hour of noon; and the Duke, who was alone there, laid aside the newspaper which he had been reading. He was sitting, or rather lounging upon a sofa: his person was wrapped in a handsome silk dressing gown of a rich pattern, with a cord tied loosely round the waist. He was thinking of the recreations he had proposed to himself and the appointments which he had for that day,—when a footman entered the room, announcing "Mr. Armytage."

An expression of annoyance swept for a moment over the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont: but it rapidly passed away, as if suppressed by his own strong will, because he did not choose to display it to the individual who was thus ushered into his presence. This individual was a man of about fifty—of middle stature, somewhat inclined to corpulency—and with a countenance that was far from prepossessing. It had a mean, cunning look—an expression of cold worldly-minded calculation, which evinced selfishness, love of gain, petty ambitions, and other low debasing feelings. Yet there was a certain gentility of manner about this person,—a gentility, however, which to the eye of a well-bred observer would seem to have been picked up from contact with his betters, rather than to be naturally his own. He was dressed with some degree of pretension—and at all events looked like a well-to-do individual in comfortable circumstances.

Advancing into the room, Mr. Armytage bowed, with a certain commingling of familiarity and respect, to the Duke of Marchmont,—who, without rising from his seat, merely nodded his head; and indicating a chair, inquired, "Well, Armytage, what has brought you hither this morning?"

"I come to consult your Grace," replied the visitor, "on a certain family matter which I have very much at heart, and on which I have been thinking for some little time past: so that at length I resolved to address myself to your lordship."

"A family matter?" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont, in evident surprise. "What the deuce can you mean? This is the first time you ever thought of consulting me on such a subject; and really, Mr. Armytage, I should fancy that with your shrewdness you are the best possible person in the world to manage your own affairs."

"But sometimes, my Lord Duke," rejoined Armytage, "the best manager requires the assistance of—of——" he was evidently about to say "a friend"—but he substituted the term "an adviser."

"Well then, proceed," exclaimed the Duke: "for it is past mid-day, and I am not yet dressed to go out."

"Your Grace is aware," proceeded Armytage, "that my daughter Zoe is now in her twentieth year——"

"Ah! is she so old as that?" said the Duke, listlessly. "But as you are aware, I have seen her so seldom."

"It is perfectly true," replied Mr. Armytage, accentuating his words into the significancy of a reproach, "that your Grace seldom condescends to appear at my parties; and it is unfortunate that on several occasions for the last two or three years, when I solicited your Grace's presence, you always had prior engagements."

"Well, Armytage, that was not my fault, you know," responded Marchmont. "But about Miss Zoe?—you were speaking of her. She is a very beautiful girl——"

"And, I flatter myself, my lord," interjected Armytage, "that she is well brought up. I have spared no expense on her education and accomplishments——"

"I recollect that she plays and sings admirably," said the Duke. "But now, pray come to the purpose."

"I will explain myself in as few words as possible," continued Mr. Armytage. "Your Grace is aware that my poor wife, Zoe's mother, died when she was young; and it therefore devolved upon me to superintend my daughter's training and rearing. I am therefore proud of her, not merely as the personification of feminine beauty and accomplishments—but likewise as a specimen of my own good taste: I mean that the developments of her intellect do credit to the presiding influence——"

"Really, Armytage, you might leave others to sing your praises," interrupted the Duke, somewhat impatiently. "What in the devil's name is the use of your talking all this nonsense to me? Let it be taken for granted that your daughter is all you represent; and now tell me what service I can render you—for it *is* a service, I see plainly enough, that you have come to ask."

"My lord, I am solicitous for the welfare of my beloved and only child," returned Armytage. "To speak the truth with frankness, I have given the most brilliant parties ever since she *came out*, in the hope of procuring for her a suitable alliance. Several young noblemen are happy enough to feast themselves at my table and to flirt in my drawing-rooms: but, my lord, as yet not one——"

"Has paid his suit to your daughter," said the Duke, anticipating his visitor's meaning. "But what would you have me do? You don't for a minute imagine that I have it in my power to find a patrician husband for your daughter?"

"On the contrary, my lord, it is precisely what I do mean," said Mr. Armytage; "and I will tell you how. Your Grace is intimately acquainted with all those young noblemen who visit me——"

"No doubt!" interjected Marchmont: "because it was through me that you became acquainted with them."

"Precisely so, my lord," said Mr. Armytage. "They are your Grace's companions and friends—you meet them at your club—you ride with them—they visit you at your country-seats and at your shooting-box—they dine at your table—they are satellites revolving round your Grace as their central sun."

"Well, Armytage—and to what is all this to lead?" inquired the Duke.

"Simply to this, my lord,—that you have it in your power to hint to these noblemen that Mr. Armytage is a wealthy man—a very wealthy man—that by successful speculations he has amassed a considerable fortune——"

"The young noblemen to whom you allude, are aware of this already," observed the Duke.

"Yes, my lord: but they are not aware that I will give my daughter sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day. Of course this is an announcement which I cannot blazon forth from the head of my dinner-table, nor in the midst of my drawing-room. Your Grace however can bring up the conversation, as if quite in an indifferent manner; and whatsoever hint your lordship may throw out in respect to my means and intentions of providing for my daughter, will assume for those who hear it, the shape of a recommendation to reflect seriously thereon. If the attention of the young noblemen to whom we are alluding, be once settled on that particular point——"

"Your aim will be soon accomplished, you think?" added the Duke. "Well, it may be so. But do you reflect, Armytage, that these young noblemen are for the most part younger sons—without much means of their own?"

"What matters their means," ejaculated Armytage, "when I possess ample? I would sooner bestow my daughter on a nobleman without a shilling, than on the richest commoner in all England."

"Really, if this be your game," observed the Duke of Marchmont, "I do not think it can be a very difficult one to be carried out successfully."

"Certainly not—if your Grace will only succour me to the extent I have been explaining," said Mr. Armytage. "May I rely——"

"Yes—certainly," responded the Duke. "I will take the very earliest opportunity of giving the hint which you have suggested. But what will Miss Zoe herself say if some fine morning you bid her receive the attentions of one whom she does not love?"

"Zoe, my lord—as a dutiful, an affectionate, and an obedient daughter," rejoined Mr. Armytage, sententiously, "will follow her father's advice in all things."

"And suppose that the whole is brought about according to your wishes," said the Duke, "you will not eventually throw upon me the blame of any mishaps that may arise—the squandering, for instance, of your daughter's dowry by the husband whom she may thus obtain——"

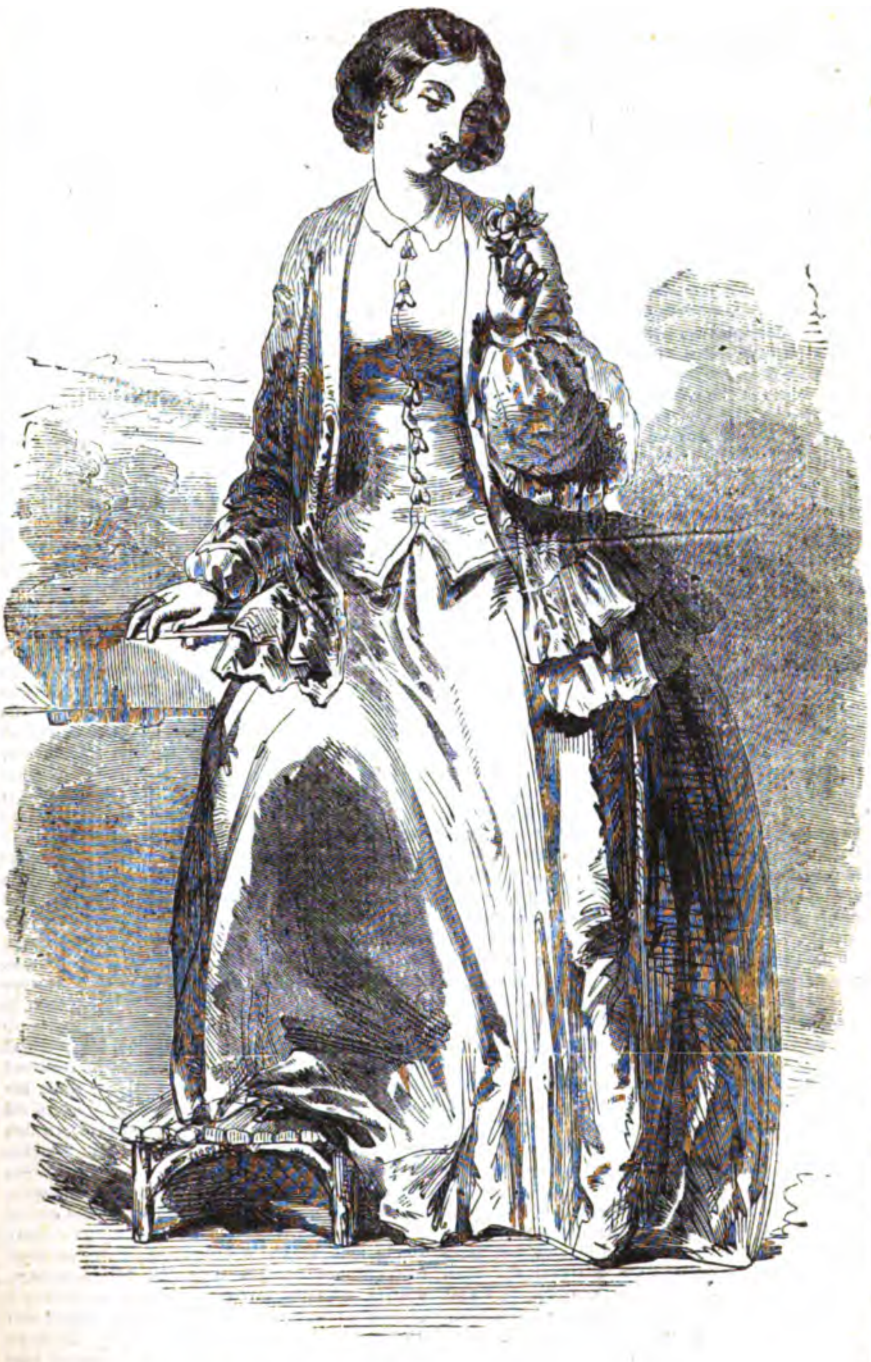
"*I*, my lord, will take care of all *that* in the marriage-settlements," replied Armytage quickly. "Suppose, for argument sake, that the noble suitor whom I seek for my daughter, should be hampered with debts. To a reasonable amount I will liquidate them; and I will guarantee a liberal income—say a thousand a year—for pocket-money and so forth, for my son-in-law. This, with the interest of my daughter's sixty thousand pounds, will yield a sufficient revenue; and the young people will have the prospect of double at my death. Is not this fair, my lord?"

"It is at least explicit," responded the Duke; "and as I see that you are so perseveringly bent on marrying your daughter to almost any one, so long as he possesses a title of nobility—I will, as already promised, do my best to help you in the matter."

"For this favour, and for all past ones, my lord," said Armytage, rising from his seat, "I beg to proffer my sincerest thanks."

He then bowed in the same half respectful half familiar manner as before—and quitted the room. As the door closed behind him, a sneering expression of contempt appeared upon the countenance of the Duke of Marchmont: but it was promptly succeeded by a darker scowl of anger and annoyance, at having been thus selected to play the ignominious part of a sort of helper-on for the ambitious schemings of the *parvenu* speculator, Mr. Armytage.

A few minutes after the departure of Mr. Armytage, and just as the Duke of Marchmont was about to proceed to his chamber to dress for going



out,—the door was again opened, and the footman announced Lord Octavian Meredith.

This was a young nobleman barely twenty-two years of age—exceedingly handsome—and of elegant appearance. He was not much above the average height: but his slenderness of shape and perfect symmetry of figure made him look taller than he really was. His hair, curling naturally, and worn somewhat profusely—was brown, but by no means of the darkest shade: his whiskers and a slight moustache added to the manliness of an otherwise youthful countenance. His features were in the Grecian style; his eyes, of dark blue, had all the clearness and brightness proper for the reflection of a soul naturally frank, candid, and generous. His manners were those of the polished gentleman,—with the slightest possible tincture of a dissipated languor—but without a real affectation. His voice was singularly pleasing—its tones rich and harmonious; and his conversation, which might be intellectual enough when he thought fit to render it so, received additional attractions from that melody of the voice. He was the youngest of the three sons of the Marquis of Penshurst. The Marquis himself was very rich, but excessively mean and parsimonious. The estates were strictly entailed upon his eldest son: the second son, though only six-and-twenty years of age, was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army: Octavian, the youngest of the three, and of whom we are specially speaking, had been intended for the Church: but for reasons which we will proceed to explain, he had renounced all thought of entering holy orders —nor had he indeed any profession at all.

Lord Octavian Meredith was naturally a well-principled young man, with a high sense of honour, and endowed with every ennobling sentiment as well as intellectual quality calculated to make him shine in the world. But he had been sent to College with a limited income; and yet, as the son of a Marquis, and himself bearing a patrician title, he was expected to keep up a certain appearance. All young men have their pride in these respects; and this pride frequently over-rules their better feelings. Parents should be particularly cautious to guard against the possibility of their children's good principles being assailed through the weak point of their pride: for no point is more vulnerable. Octavian found himself at College without adequate means to keep up a becoming appearance. He got into debt; and his sense of honour prompted him to meet his engagements according to the punctuality that was promised. He wrote to his father, frankly and candidly explaining his position. The Marquis, instead of treating his son with a kind consideration, sent his lawyer to Oxford to offer a composition to the creditors. The tradesmen remonstrated: the lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and told them they might do as they liked, but that they had better take what he offered than stand the chance of getting nothing at all—for that the Marquis of Penshurst was determined not to suffer his son, while a minor, to be fleeced by those who recklessly gave him credit. The tradesmen accepted the composition; and they were given to understand that no farther debts contracted by Lord Octavian, would be thus settled. Octavian was relieved from his embarrassments: but his position was ruined at the University. He obtained the nick-name of "the Bankrupt Lord:" the wealthiest of his companions cut him direct—the poorest looked coldly upon him. His situation became intolerable: he wrote to his father to beseech that he might be allowed to choose some other profession than that of the Church: the Marquis was obstinate in his refusal—and Lord Octavian left the University in humiliation and disgust.

His father refused to see him for some time; and at last when he consented, he upbraided the young man so bitterly and treated him with so much harshness that Octavian's home became as intolerable as his situation was at Oxford. In a few months' time he attained his twenty-first year; and he then requested his father to make him a fixed allowance. The penurious old Marquis sternly refused: his tyranny increased towards Octavian—who, it must in justice be said, did all he possibly could to merit a renewal of the paternal confidence. His mother had long been dead: otherwise he would have found a kind and considerate mediatrix in her. In short, it became impossible for him to tarry beneath his father's roof; and through the intervention of a distant relative, who happened to have some influence with the Marquis, Octavian procured an allowance of five hundred a year. Before he left home, he besought the Marquis to use his interest to get him a commission in the Army, or to launch him into the sphere of Diplomacy: but the old nobleman could not forget that his original plans on behalf of his youngest son had been thwarted by his withdrawal from the University;—and faithful to his churlish nature, he positively refused to do anything more for him.

Octavian accordingly quitted the paternal home, and took lodgings. He was but little past his majority; and his experiences of life were hitherto bitter enough. His spirit had been chafed—his feelings wounded—his hopes disappointed: he had the will, and he felt that he had the intelligence, to enter upon some career in which he might distinguish himself and carve out his own fortunes: but the opportunity had been denied him. This was indeed a bad beginning for a young man just entering upon the world,—sufficient to demoralise him completely—render him indifferent to the good principles which had hitherto for the most part guided him—and prepare the way for his eventual ruin. Octavian did not entirely escape the ill effects of those inauspicious circumstances. On taking lodgings, he was launched as it were upon the town; and his companions were men in his own sphere of life. He became a favourite with them: his obliging disposition, his polished manners, and his natural intelligence rendered him a desirable guest at their tables; while his own limited means compelled him to accept all these hospitalities as the only condition on which he could obtain any society at all. He was introduced to the Duke of Marchmont,—who, from the way in which he was situated with his wife, was fond of giving bachelor dinner-parties and of being surrounded with a number of gay, lively young men, as the reader might have gathered from certain remarks made by Mr. Armytage. Thrown into the midst of this society, Octavian gradually found himself being drawn deeper and deeper into the vortex of dissipation. He kept out of debt: but he could not avoid keeping late hours and joining in the pleasures which his companions courted. To abstract himself from their company at an early hour when what they called "the joviality of the evening" was only just beginning—or to decline forming one of whatsoever party of pleasure might be in contemplation—would be to seal his own exclusion from those circles in future. What was Octavian to do? He felt that he was entering upon a dangerous career, and that his naturally good principles were already receiving certain shocks, each successive one being accompanied with less remorseful feelings than the former; and he yearned to escape from these evil influences. But how was he to do so? His mind, having been chafed and disappointed, was too unsettled and restless to enable him to sit down quietly in the midst of books; and it was not to be expected that a young man just entering into life, would fly to some distant seclusion and turn hermit. On every occasion when invited to dine with the Duke of Marchmont or any other of his friends, Octavian would hesitate what answer to send: he trembled to go, yet knew not how to refuse; and so he went, vowing it should be for the last time. But these "last times" really never reached the end, nor fulfilled their own meaning; and thus Lord Octavian Meredith—with the highest aspirations, and the best capacities for doing himself good—was being gradually and imperceptibly sucked into that vortex of dissipation which London life affords, and in which many a fine spirit, noble intellect, and magnanimous heart is wrecked and engulfed.

It has been necessary to give the reader this long description of a young nobleman who is destined to play no inconsiderable part upon the stage of our story; and he it now was who was ushered into the Duke of Marchmont's presence soon after Mr. Armytage had taken his departure.

"The very one whom at the instant I most longed to see!" exclaimed the Duke, cordially grasping Octavian's hand. "I was thinking of going for a good long ride: for to tell you the truth, I drank somewhat too much champagne last night——By the bye, you were not one of us at Lord Oxenden's?"

"No—I was at a party at Mr. Armytage's," replied Meredith.

"Ah! Armytage has just been here," said the Duke.

"I saw him driving away in his carriage," observed Octavian, "and bowed to him. But I wish, my dear Duke, you could give me half-an-hour of serious conversation—and then I will cheerfully accompany you in a ride."

"Serious conversation, my dear Meredith?" ejaculated Marchmont, with a laugh. "Are you really disposed to be serious? Come, shall we have luncheon? A glass of hock and some soda-water will do us good."

"Not now, I pray you," responded Meredith. "Give me the half-hour—and then I am at your bidding."

"Be it so—the half-hour of serious discourse," said the Duke: and he stretched himself indolently upon the sofa. "Now, Octavian, proceed: I am all attention."

"You know, my dear Duke," resumed the young nobleman, "how I am situated with my father——"

"Now, I will cut you short at once," interrupted Marchmont. "You have temporary need of a sum of money? Tell me without another word how much it is—and my cheque-book is at hand."

"No, my dear Duke—it is not *that*," replied Meredith, his looks expressing his gratitude for the offer. "Nevertheless, I did come to solicit a favour at your hands——It is that you will use your interest to procure me a diplomatic post. I have an inclination to go abroad——"

"Ridiculous, Octavian!" exclaimed the Duke: "we cannot spare you from amongst our own set. But seriously speaking, my dear friend, I have not the slightest interest with the present Ministry. You know that I belong to the good old school of Toryism: I always vote against the Government on principle: and if there were a shoe-black's situation to be given away, I might vainly ask for even so paltry a post for a nominee of my own."

"I feared that it would be so," observed Octavian, his handsome countenance becoming deeply overshadowed, and sorrow clouding his clear blue eyes.

"But what means this sudden resolve on your part?" inquired Marchmont,—"this anxiety to get abroad?"

"You have treated me with so much kindness, I will be frank with you," answered Octavian. "My means are limited—I am dependent on my father's caprice—I have no profession, no position—and I long to improve my circumstances in every respect."

"I understand," said the Duke; "and it is natural enough. But, Ah! my dear fellow, a thought strikes me! You know I do not flatter: but a young nobleman of your personal appearance, fine intellect, fascinating manners——You should marry!"

"Ah, marry!" said Octavian, with an ill-repressed sigh. "I have no fortune; and what father will consent to bestow his daughter, if she be an heiress, upon one so impoverished as I?"

"You under-rate your own merits," observed the Duke of Marchmont. "In matrimonial affairs there are such things as equivalents. Suppose, for instance, a young lady brings you a decent fortune, and you confer upon her the rank and title which she possesses not——"

"I know that things are managed in this way," observed Octavian slowly: "but to tell you the truth, it is a proceeding from which my pride recoils."

"Pride!" echoed the Duke. "The only sacrifice of pride that I can see, would be in the fact of you, a patrician, giving your hand to a plebeian."

"You of all men to talk in this way!" exclaimed Meredith, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Ah! you fancy that I am the proudest of the proud?" observed the Duke. "But I am looking to your interests——"

"And I candidly confess that the sacrifice of pride to which I alluded, is not precisely what you are thinking of. I meant to say," continued Lord Octavian, "that I should not like to be so much indebted to a wife for the enjoyment of a fortune. As for the distinctions between patricians and plebeians, you know very well that I am not such a Tory as yourself."

"Let us recur to my argument about equivalents," said the Duke. "If you give a title, and the lady brings a fortune, you make common stock of those elements which constitute social position and comfort: you are mutually indebted —and in that respect you stand on perfectly independent grounds towards each other."

"Admitting the force of your argument," observed Meredith,—"and supposing that I fell in with some young lady who, possessing a fortune, would accept me as her husband,—how could I tutor my heart to love her? and how could I marry her unless it did?"

"Oh! if you mean to throw love into the scale," ejaculated the Duke, almost contemptuously, "I must retreat from the argument. I only undertake to advise you how to obtain a settled position; I cannot compose philters that will engender love. Perhaps, my dear Meredith, you love already?"

"I know not," responded Octavian, with some degree of confusion. "And yet methinks that the image of one whom I have seen—on two or three occasions—is often present to my fancy——"

"And pray who is this fair being to whom you allude?" asked the Duke: "for of course she must be fair, thus to have made an impression on your heart."

"She is the loveliest girl I ever beheld in my life!" ejaculated Octavian, with an enthusiasm which he could not at the moment repress, but which when thus given way to, left him overwhelmed with confusion.

"But who is she?" inquired Marchmont. "You may tell me: I never interfere treacherously with my friends' love-affairs."

"I would tell you cheerfully—but I myself do not know," responded Octavian. "I have seen her on two or three occasions, walking with a youth whom by the likeness I know to be her brother——"

"Then you have never spoken to her?" asked the Duke.

"Never," replied Meredith. "She is as modest as she is beautiful; and I do not think that she even so much as noticed that she was on those occasions the object of my interested regards. No —she is virgin bashfulness itself!"

"And to what sphere of life does your unknown fair one belong? Ah, by that tell-tale blush I see she is beneath your aspirations—or rather beneath what they ought to be."

"This brother and sister of whom I am speaking," replied Octavian, in a serious tone, "are evidently respectable——"

"Respectable, but not rich?" exclaimed the Duke. "Perhaps tradesman's children, or something of that sort? Now, my dear friend, renounce this phantasy of your's as speedily as ever you can."

"Yes—I must, I must," said Octavian quickly, and with some degree of emotion. "It is useless to cherish a dream—madness, in my position, to cradle myself in a delusion!"

"The fact is," resumed Marchmont, "that if you fancied an obscure girl ever so fondly and passionately—I mean in a virtuous sense—you could not afford to love her. Your circumstances will not permit you. You must marry, Octavian, according to the counsel which I have given you. It may seem repulsive at first; but the longer you think of it, the more palatable will my plan appear. Get a position, by all means: make yourself truly independent of your father, and of your elder brother after him. There are heiresses who would jump at an offer from a good-looking young man with the title of Lord prefixed to his name. What say you, Meredith?"

"It is something to be thought over," replied the young nobleman: and then he added slowly, "If I did form such an alliance, I would do my duty towards my wife—I would surround her with attentions, even if I could not bring my heart to love her with sincerity——But where are such heiresses to be looked for?"

"Where?" said the Duke, apparently in a careless manner. "Oh, that is your business! I have given you the counsel: it is now for you——But, Ah! when I bethink me, there is the daughter of that very gentleman we spoke of just now."

"Who?" inquired Octavian.

"Armytage," was the Duke's response. "Do you know, my good fellow, that Armytage is a very wealthy man—and that his daughter's dowry will be sixty thousand pounds on her wedding-day? This I can tell you for a fact. I have known Armytage, as you are aware, for a great number of years: I respect him because he is an upright, honest man, who by his own industry has made himself."

"He was your factor, or steward, or intendant originally—or something of that sort—was he not?" inquired Octavian, who had been listening thoughtfully to all that the Duke said.

"Yes—something of that sort," responded Marchmont, again relapsing into his manner of seeming carelessness. "He scraped together some money; and I think he had a pretty considerable sum left him by a deceased relative. So he came up to London—launched out in business as a merchant and speculator—and thus made his fortune. You know very well, Octavian, that my antipathies are great in respect to the plebeian money-plodders on the other side of Temple Bar: but in this individual instance I have never forgotten that Armytage served me faithfully and honestly—and so I have countenanced him."

"The feeling does you honour, my dear Duke," replied Octavian warmly: for he believed in its sincerity. "It is all the more honourable too, inasmuch as it is at the expense of a prejudice."

"And Zoe—Mr. Armytage's daughter—is really a beautiful girl," proceeded the Duke,—"elegant, accomplished, and well calculated to shine in any drawing-room. Come, my dear friend, I see that my counsel is not altogether thrown away upon you. We will have lunch now, and then go out for a ride. You can reflect at your leisure upon all that I have been suggesting."

"Yes," murmured Octavian, with another ill-repressed sigh, as he thought of the beautiful unknown whom he had seen on two or three occasions, and whose bashful loveliness had made more or less impression on his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

ZOE.

In a sumptuously furnished drawing-room, in a house belonging to one of the handsomest terraces in the Regent's Park, a lady was seated. The apartment itself was characterised with splendour more than with elegance: every detail of its appointments was rich and costly—so that the evidences of wealth were assembled together with a profusion more calculated for ostentatious display than consistent with refined taste. The walls were crowded with vast mirrors: the style of the furniture was of scarlet and gold: nick-nacks which had cost vast sums, were scattered about as ornamental trifles. The room, though spacious, was in point of fact encumbered with its own magnificence: and thus was it divested of that real air of comfort which good taste knows so skilfully how to blend with the dazzling effects of splendour.

Yet amidst all these objects of a grand and gorgeous luxury which were so overwhelmingly heaped together in this drawing-room, there were a few slight evidences of a more correct and refined intellect than that which had presided over the general appointments of the apartment. There were flowers tastefully arranged with a view to the harmonizing of their brilliant colours: music rested upon an open piano, and lay upon a stool near a harp. There was a portfolio upon one of the centre-tables; and this contained several beautiful specimens of drawing, alike in pencil and in water-colour. An elegant piece of embroidery-work, half finished, lay on the sofa on which sat the fair occupant of this room. The books which were formally arranged upon the tables for mere purposes of show, were as trumpery in their contents as they were gorgeous in their binding: but on the sofa, near the embroidery, lay three or four volumes containing the works of the best British poets; and these were in a comparatively common binding. The dress of the young lady herself was simple and neat—in the best possible taste—and therefore in reality characterized with a more real elegance than if it had been of the magnificent style which one would have expected to discern on the part of a female occupant of that sumptuously furnished room. Need we say that it was the refined taste of this lady to which a visitor would feel himself indebted for those little evidences of superior and more intellectual judgment which, few though they were, nevertheless afforded a certain relief to the eye and to the mind, otherwise dazzled and satiated by the presence of all that ostentatious display of wealth?

The lady of whom we are speaking, was Zoe, Mr. Armytage's daughter; and the house to which we have introduced the reader, was Mr. Armytage's mansion. All the rooms in that house—save two—were furnished with a costliness corresponding to that of the principal apartment: thousands and thousands of pounds must have been lavished in fitting up this gorgeous dwelling. But everywhere throughout the mansion, with the exception of the two rooms to which we have alluded, there was the pervasive indication of the vulgar mind of a *parvenu*, who, aspiring to move in the best and most brilliant society, fancied that his own plebeian origin and upstart position would be lost sight of in the dazzling splendours by which he was surrounded. The two rooms which formed an exception to the rule, were the private apartments of Zoe Armytage herself: namely, her boudoir and her bed-chamber. Those she had caused to be fitted up in conformance with her own refined taste; and the simple elegance which characterised these rooms, afforded a sufficient proof of what the entire mansion would have been if the same genius had superintended all its appointments.

But now, between three and four o'clock on a certain afternoon, we find Miss Armytage seated in the drawing-room, from the simple fact that this was the visiting hour when "morning calls" might be expected: for in the fashionable world it is always *morning* until dinner-time, even though the dinner hour be postponed until seven o'clock in the evening. Zoe, however, could not endure the magnificence of that apartment unless it were relieved by the presence of flowers, and unless her time, when she was alone, could be occupied with music, with her pencil, her embroidery, or her favourite authors. The simply-bound books, therefore, had accompanied her from the well-chosen little library in her own boudoir; because not for a single instant could she bear to bend over the nauseating trash which filled the gorgeously bound Annuals which lay upon the tables.

Miss Armytage was about twenty years of age. Her countenance was an oval of the most faultless outline: she was not merely beautiful, but interesting—and of that sweet loveable appearance which, apart from mere beauty, renders a young woman so exquisitely charming. Her features were regular and delicately formed: her nose was perfectly straight: her mouth was small—the lips classically cut, and of scarlet brightness. Her eyes were large and of a clear limpid blue,—fringed with dark lashes, and surmounted by brows well separated and finely arched: so that the expression of her countenance was full of frankness and ingenuous innocence. Those lashes and those brows were many shades darker than her hair, which was of a rich light brown—soft and silky—and with so lustrous a gloss upon it, that if worn in bands and left somewhat wavy, it seemed golden where the light fell upon it, and dark where the shades remained. But if worn in ringlets, then did a perfect shower of that light brown hair fall in natural curls on either side of this lovely countenance,—descending upon well-formed shoulders, and upon a neck pure and stainless as alabaster. There was something inexpressibly sweet in her smile: the purity of her thoughts made her countenance seem the face of an angel; and as her complexion was delicately fair, though with the roseate tint of health upon the cheeks, this transparent purity of the skin added to the angelic style of her loveliness.

Though not tall—indeed not above the middle height of woman—her figure nevertheless appeared of a loftier stature on account of its admirable symmetry, its lithe elasticity, and its flowing roundness of contour and of limb. Every movement was characterised by an unstudied grace: every gesture was replete with an elegance all its own. However plebeian her parentage might have been, there were nevertheless all the best unbought graces of a natural aristocracy about this beautiful and charming creature.

Such was Zoe Armytage. But how was it that such a man as he who was introduced to the reader in the preceding chapter, could possess such a daughter? Mr. Armytage had risen from next to nothing. He did not mind sometimes boasting amongst his City acquaintances—never amongst his fashionable ones—that he had been the architect of his own fortune: yet he never was known definitely to state what he was in the beginning. He went no farther back than the period when he acted as steward or intendant over the vast estates of the present Duke of Marchmont. However, at the time when Zoe was old enough to begin to receive impressions from the circumstances in which she was placed, her father was already a well-to-do man. Thus, whatever his earliest position might have been, Zoe's recollections went no farther back than to associate themselves with a comfortable well-furnished home, with servants, and the usual appendages of rapidly increasing prosperity. Her mother had died early; and as she grew up, she perceived, with an understanding beyond her years, that though her father supervised the governess and the preceptors who managed the various departments of her education, he was by no means capable of judiciously exercising such authority. She loved her father, not merely because she was naturally of an affectionate disposition—but likewise because she beheld, or fancied she beheld, in his zealous care on her behalf, a fond paternal endeavour to indemnify her as much as possible for the loss of her maternal parent. Thus as she grew up, she delicately avoided hurting her father's feelings by suffering him to perceive that her own intuitive good taste and naturally delicate appreciation were as pure gold is to dross in comparison with his vulgar, upstart, *parvenu* notions. While seeming to follow his advice in all her studies, she nevertheless in reality yielded implicit confidence to the sounder judgment and better tastes of the first-rate governess and masters who were engaged in her tuition. The result was that her mind expanded beneath the best possible influences, totally unaffected by that erroneous one which her father sought to shed upon every phase of its development. For if she had listened to him, she would have devoted herself to the fashionable frivolities instead of to the substantialities of education: she would have become fitted only for a mere drawing-room doll—whereas she had turned out an intellectual and truly accomplished young lady.

It may easily be supposed that with a mind so gifted and with an understanding so capacious as Zoe's, she could not have failed to observe the ways in which her father had obtained wealth. She knew him to be one who had speculated—if speculation it could be called—with all that worldly-minded shrewdness which invariably left him a gainer, though the enterprise itself should fail and involve all his confiding associates in ruin. She knew likewise that he lent money to the profligate and the necessitous at a usurious rate, and never without security more or less tangible: she knew that the extravagances of the patrician spendthrift and the embarrassments of the struggling, hard-working, industrious trader, had been the sources of no inconsiderable part of his immense fortune. She was aware that he had seen poverty in palaces as well as in prisons—and had penetrated into both with no sympathising object, but for the mere purpose of availing himself of the proud lord's wants or the poor tradesman's necessities, as the means of aggrandising his own wealth. All this did Zoe know: and therefore she had a complete reading of her father's heart. She knew that it was not merely hard, because hardness melts—and *his* heart never melted; that it was not merely cold—because coldness may relax, and *his* never relaxed: but she knew its utter nothingness in respect to all kindly sentiments when dealing with the world—its complete impassability in the pursuance of a career which had simply one aim: namely, money-making.

All this Zoe knew; and yet she loved her father. She would not suffer herself to despise him: she could not possibly hate him. She loved him because she fancied—and in this instance only was her judgment at fault—that all he did for her was the result of a doting fondness on his part. Of this fondness she beheld the evidences in the sums he had spent upon her education—the constant care which he made her take of her health—the visible pride with which he surveyed her in his own sumptuous saloons—the separate equipages he kept for her—the lavish profusion with which he furnished her purse—the rich presents he was continuously making her—the exultation with which he would sometimes hint that she ought to form a brilliant alliance—and the assurance he was constantly giving her that his only object in heaping up wealth was to endow her with those riches. Fine as Zoe's intellect was, and shrewd her understanding, it is nevertheless not to be wondered at if, in her inexperience of the world, and the natural generosity of her heart, she should put the most favourable interpretation upon her father's conduct towards her. But Mr. Armytage did really love his daughter, though it was a love after the fashion of his own sordid soul—a love that was made up of vulgar pride as much as of any other element. He saw that she was beautiful, and he was proud of her: he heard her accomplishments spoken of, and he flattered himself that for these she was indebted much more to his own supervising judgment than to the fine qualifications of her own intellect or to the proficiency of her governess and preceptors. To *her* only did he ever speak in accents of fondness: her influence alone could induce him to perform a charitable action—though this he would emblazon with all the flaming hues of his own ostentation. But still Zoe saw how different he was to her than to the rest of the world: she attributed it to a pure paternal fondness; and therefore was it that, with all his faults, she loved her father so tenderly and so well. Little did she think that this father of her's would drag her to the altar and immolate her as the sacrifice to a patrician alliance, rather than suffer her to proceed of her own accord to that altar, to bestow her hand on some plebeian object of her choice, if such choice she should happen to make.

Zoe however had made no such choice. Yet she loved: and who it was that had thus become the object of her affections, will be presently seen. He whom she thus loved, was as yet totally ignorant that he had made any impression upon the mind of this charming young lady: no one suspected her love—neither her father nor her handmaids. The natural purity of her thoughts, blended with her maidenly dignity, had prevented her from betraying the secret by even the slightest sign whereby the sentiment of love is so often wont to reveal itself. At the time of which we are writing, Zoe's love had not existed many months in her heart; and yet it was already profoundly rooted—it had entertwined itself, so to speak, with every fibre of her being. But it was a love entirely of the sentiment, and not of the sense—a love which was strictly a sentiment, and not a passion—a love of that æsthetic character in which the ancient Greeks believed, but the mere mention of which only provokes the sneer of scepticism in this more worldly-minded and practical age. Nor do we ourselves believe that such love is often found. It is the lost paradise of the soul, of which few are now permitted to obtain a glimpse—much less to receive an infusion of its pure and holy light into the sanctuary of their hearts. Yet such a love as that was Zoe's; and she cherished it without ever dreaming of aught beyond. The very idea of its realization would have seemed to her a thought tinctured with grossness, if emanating from herself and not inspired by an avowal on the part of its object.

Having thus sufficiently introduced Miss Armytage to our readers, we may pursue the thread of our narrative. It was, as we have already said, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, that Zoe, having quitted her boudoir, took her seat in the drawing-room to await the presence of any visitor or visitress who might happen to call. Her father had been with her for about half-an-hour: she had played to him on the piano and the harp; and he had looked over her portfolio of drawings. Not that he had the faintest idea of music, nor the slightest taste in a pictorial or artistic sense: but he chose to affect a very great fondness for those elegant accomplishments in which his daughter excelled—while he cordially detested the course of reading to which she was particularly devoted. He had only left her at the time of which we are writing, to speak to some one on business who had called at the mansion in the Regent's Park: for though he had ostensibly retired from commercial affairs by giving up his counting-house in the City, he nevertheless continued in a sort of private manner his financial enterprises by advancing loans on good security.

Having transacted whatsoever business it was that had called him away, Mr. Armytage returned to the drawing room, where Zoe in the interval had taken up one of the books which she had brought from the boudoir.

"What are you reading there, my love?" he inquired, leaning over the back of the sofa, which was drawn away from the wall so as to be near one of the centre-tables.

"Cowper's Poems," responded Zoe, looking up at her father with a sweet glance, in which there was an amiable deprecation: for she evidently foresaw the observation that would next come from his lips.

"How absurd," he exclaimed, "to waste your time over that sentimental nonsense. And really, Zoe, when there are so many elegantly bound books which you might group about you, I wonder at your having those poor-looking volumes here in the drawing-room."

"I will put them out of sight, dear father," she at once rejoined, "if you object to them:"—and she hastened to thrust the books under one of the immense velvet cushions bordered with gold fringes and having long tassels likewise of gold.

"If you don't like the tales and poetry in those volumes," continued Mr. Armytage, glancing towards the trumpery works in their splendid binding that lay upon the table, "it is quite fashionable, you know, to have the last new novel lying by your side. I have often begged you, my dear Zoe, to read fashionable novels: they improve the taste, and furnish ideas for conversation in company."

"Really, my dear father," replied Zoe, who however seldom contradicted or remonstrated against the displays of her sire's false notions and vulgar taste in such matters, "I do not think that these fashionable novels of which you speak, can in any way afford improvement for the mind or manners; and as for the conversation, heaven help those who think of drawing their inspirations from such sources!"

Mr. Armytage was about to reply, when an equipage dashed up to the front of the house: and hastening to the window, he exclaimed, "It is my friend the Duke of Marchmont."

He then sat down and took up a book; so that he might have the air of one who did not put himself out of the way for even a ducal visitor, but would receive him with as little excitement and as little fluttering of pride as if he were the humblest of acquaintances. But he was not destined to receive the visit at all on the present occasion: for when one of his footmen,—habited, by the bye, in a livery resplendently gorgeous,—made his appearance in the drawing-room, it was not to announce the Duke, but simply to request Mr. Armytage to step down, as his Grace had a word to say to him but begged to be excused alighting from his carriage as he was in a hurry to keep an appointment elsewhere. For a moment a scowl of displeasure appeared upon the features of Mr. Armytage, as if he felt that he was receiving the treatment of a plebeian at the hands of a patrician immeasurably his superior: but the next moment, as a recollection flashed to his mind, his countenance recovered its wonted cold equanimity—and he sped down stairs.

"No doubt," he thought to himself, as he thus hastened forth to the Duke's carriage, "Marchmont has come to tell me something about the affair I spoke to him of a few days back."

The Duke was alone inside the carriage; and as Armytage hurried up to the window, the footman who had descended from behind to knock at the front door, stood back a pace or two so as not to have the air of listening to whatsoever might be said.

"I just called to tell you, Armytage," said the Duke, in a low voice, "that I have been enabled to manage that little business about which you called on me the other day. What say you to Lord Octavian Meredith, youngest son of the Marquis of Penshurst?"

Mr. Armytage reflected deeply for a few minutes, without making any response.

"The family is a very ancient and a most honourable one," continued the Duke of Marchmont. "Meredith himself is a handsome and elegant young man——"

"But if I mistake not," observed Mr. Armytage, "he is at variance with his relatives; and I would not have my daughter marry into any family where she would stand a chance of being cut, and where I myself should not be a welcome guest."

"Of all this you need entertain no apprehension," rejoined the Duke of Marchmont. "The Marquis of Penshurst is more parsimonious than proud; and depend upon it, he will joyfully receive his son and his son's wife when the latter brings an ample dowry with her on her wedding-day. As for yourself, you have only to lend a few thousand pounds to Lord Meredith, the Marquis's eldest son—and to Lord Charles, his second son—both of whom are kept by their father's penuriousness in total want of money,—you have only to do this, I say, in order to receive all possible civility at their hands."

"Yes, your Grace speaks truly," said Mr. Armytage. "As for Octavian Meredith, he is a very nice young man—a son-in-law of whom one might feel proud. But are you sure, my lord——"

"I am sure, Armytage," interrupted the Duke, "that I have managed the thing most capitally for you. Meredith furnished me an opportunity the other day of counselling him relative to his affairs: indeed it was the very same day on which you yourself called—and I have had him with me every day since. You may expect a visit from him this afternoon: so I shall not wait another moment—lest he might think it strange if he were to see me in conversation with you. Play your cards well, Armytage—and the fair Zoe will be Lady Octavian Meredith."

The carriage drove away; and Mr. Armytage re-ascended to his drawing-room, perfectly satisfied with the proposed arrangements: for after all the Duke of Marchmont had just said, he saw at a glance how his daughter and himself would obtain, after the marriage, a suitable footing in the Penshurst family. But as he returned to the apartment in which Zoe was seated, his countenance betrayed not that anything unusual was passing in his mind; and as he was invariably accustomed to parade before his daughter, as well as in the presence of his friends and acquaintances, his great intimacy with the Duke of Marchmont, he was at no loss for an excuse for his Grace's flying visit.

"If I was to listen to that fellow Marchmont," he said to Zoe, "you would scarcely ever have my society at the dinner-table. He is always wanting me to go and dine with him. That is what he came for just now. I do really believe he feels more pleasure in my company than in that of any other of his friends. But hark! there's another knock at the door."

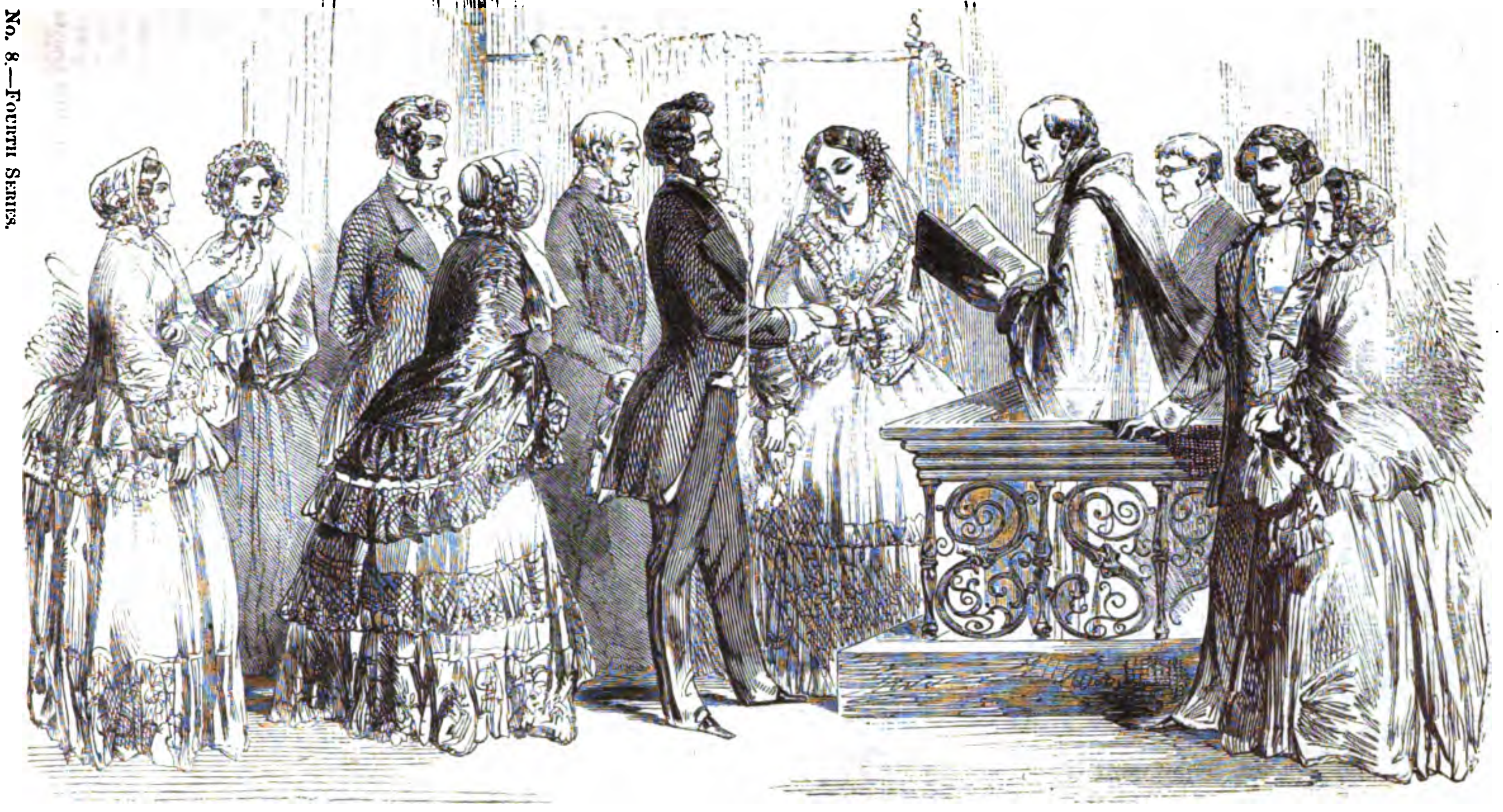
Again did Mr. Armytage take up one of the splendidly bound annuals, and affect to be reading some stanzas by Lady Letitia Fitsharding Fitzpatrick Languishdale. The lines were by courtesy denominated poetry; but in reality they were the most mawkish twaddle that ever was contained in an array of words set out in unmetrical lines, and with false jingles by way of rhymes. The door was thrown open by the gorgeously dressed footman; and Lord Octavian Meredith was announced.

The reader is already aware that this young nobleman had for some little time past been an occasional visitor at Mr. Armytage's house, and one of those scions of the aristocracy whom the wealthy *parvenu* had, through the aid of the Duke of Marchmont, secured as the "lions" of his saloons. He therefore received Octavian with becoming courtesy—though with no more cordiality than he had been previously wont to display; for he was careful not to excite a suspicion of the machinations which were in progress. Zoe received the young nobleman with a lady-like affability; and the conversation at first turned upon indifferent subjects. Suddenly Mr. Armytage recollected that he had letters to send off to the post; and he begged his lordship to excuse his temporary absence from the room.

Meredith was now alone with Zoe; and he gave the conversation an intellectual turn. The young lady entered easily into this train of discourse: it was pursued—and both became gradually more and more interested in it. Meredith saw that Zoe possessed a well-cultivated mind: he had all along known that she was accomplished; but he did not suspect the existence of so much of wisdom's treasures in her understanding. He was the more charmed too, inasmuch as her remarks were made with a mingling of well-bred ease and maidenly bashfulness which totally divested her of the obtrusiveness of the "blue-stocking." He had come expressly thus to draw her out—or, in other words, to fathom the depths of her mind: for he was neither so selfishly degraded in his own disposition, nor so desperate in his circumstances, as to resolve all in a moment to seek as a wife a young female of shallow intellect and frivolous disposition. He remained an hour with Zoe on this occasion; so that he far exceeded the usual limit of a morning call: but the interval appeared to him the lapse of a few minutes only. He had never known so much of Zoe before; and he was as much surprised and delighted at what he thus found her to be on a better acquaintance.

He took his leave, and striking into one of the most secluded portions of the Regent's Park, deliberated with himself. Did he love Zoe? No: assuredly not. Could he bring himself to love her? He sighed. That sigh was an answer to the question—an answer in the negative! The image of the lovely unknown of whom he had spoken to the Duke of Marchmont, suddenly rose up to his mental vision; and he felt that his heart was inextricably engaged there. Then, should he persevere in his contemplated suit with Zoe? His naturally honourable feelings shrank from the thought. At that instant he almost loathed himself as one who had entertained the idea of performing the despicable part of a selfish fortune-hunter; and he said to himself, "No: poverty sooner—poverty ten thousand times sooner, in preference to this utter self-abasement in my own estimation!"

Two days afterwards there was a splendid party at the house of Mr. Armytage; and Lord Octavian Meredith was one of the invited guests. He attached himself to Zoe as her principal partner in the dance: he turned the music for her as she



sat at the piano: he accompanied her in a duet. He had a fine voice and sang admirably: Zoe's voice was of silvery softness; and she too sang with exquisite taste—a taste that was all the more apparent from the utter absence of affectation. When Lord Octavian, after having sat by Zoe's side at the supper-table, returned at two in the morning to his own lodgings, he thought to himself that never did Miss Armytage appear so ravishingly beautiful and so charmingly fascinating in his eyes; so that he mentally ejaculated, "After all, I think I can love her!"

On the following day he paid the usual visit of courtesy which follows an evening's entertainment; and on this occasion he remained an hour and a half with Zoe,—her father having at the time, or pretending to have, a very pressing appointment with some great nobleman, whom he of course spoke of as his very particular and intimate friend. After this visit Lord Octavian said confidently to himself, "I not only *can* love her—but I *do* already love her!"

Yet an image rose up before him, and a sigh came up into his very throat. He hurried his pace through the Regent's Park as if to escape from the image: he stifled the sigh ere giving it vent; and then he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was all nothing—that the fair unknown had really no hold upon his affections—that it was a mere passing whim or caprice excited by a pretty face and a sylphid figure—and besides, that it was perfectly ridiculous to entertain a serious thought of one to whom he had never spoken in his life, and whom he might never see again. Still there was a secret voice speaking with its silent eloquence in the depth of his soul, which told him that he was reasoning not as the truth really was, but according as he wished it to be; and this time the deep-drawn sigh could not be altogether stifled.

However, the next day beheld him again a visitor at Mr. Armytage's house. How could he help going thither on this occasion?—he had a piece of new music of which he had spoken on the preceding day, and which he had volunteered to bring Zoe. It was a duet; and as Mr. Armytage was present in the drawing-room when Octavian was ushered thither, there was no impropriety in his offering to sing it with the young lady. They did sing it: Octavian thought that never had Miss Armytage displayed her musical accomplishments with so fine an effect—never had her loveliness appeared more angelically charming. When he took his leave after this visit, he had far less difficulty in putting aside the image of the beauteous unknown, or in suppressing the rising sigh, than he had experienced on the preceding day. On the following day he called upon Zoe again; and for nearly each successive day for the ensuing six weeks. On every occasion he became —or fancied that he became, more profoundly enamoured of Miss Armytage: he saw himself received with a gradually increasing cordiality on the part of the father, and with an unchanging affability on that of the daughter. He seldom thought now of the beauteous unknown: less seldom too did he find himself sighing when her image did happen to rise up to his mental vision. But did Zoe herself love him? was he indeed not indifferent to her? or did she regard him merely as a visitor with whom a sort of intellectual friendship had sprung up? This question puzzled him: he had never seen on Zoe's part the slightest betrayal of any tender partiality towards him. What if he were to offer and to be refused? Such a catastrophe would be terribly humiliating to his manly pride;—and in this frame of mind, hovering between hope and uncertainty, it was by no means difficult for Octavian Meredith to persuade himself that he loved Miss Armytage to a degree that his very happiness depended upon their alliance. To do him ample justice, the more he had seen of her and the more he had felt himself attracted towards her, the less he had thought of the pecuniary advantages to be derived from such a marriage. The naturally noble feelings of his disposition, by inducing him to scorn the thought of mere selfish interest, led him to believe that his sentiment towards Zoe was now altogether a disinterested and a legitimate one. So easy is it, under certain circumstances, to hug as a positively settled belief that which we really wish to believe in!—so facile is it to cheat at times our own higher intelligence and regard our hopes and our wishes as actual and unmistakable convictions! There are more false fanaticisms and delusions of the mind than even the most experienced of men are always willing to admit unto themselves.

Six weeks, as we have said, had passed since that day on which we first introduced Zoe to our readers: and one afternoon Octavian Meredith called at a somewhat earlier hour than usual. He found Zoe alone in the drawing-room; and as he entered, she put down a book which she had been reading.

"May I see," he inquired, after the usual compliments had passed, "what is the subject of your recreative study?"

"Oh, certainly," responded the young lady, with her usual affable smile. "It is one of my favourite authors."

"Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village,'" said Octavian, as he took up the book. "Miss Armytage, there must be times when, with your intelligence, you view with a feeling which borders on disgust the frivolities of fashionable life. I confess candidly that I do. I am convinced that where there is no intellect there is no heart—but that if the head be hollow, the place where the heart should be is likewise a void."

"I know not, my lord," replied Zoe, "that I would go altogether to such an extreme conclusion——"

"No—because were you to admit it," he exclaimed, with irrepressible enthusiasm, "you would be as it were proclaiming that you are all heart, because you are all intelligence. Ah! Miss Armytage," he added, "were I possessed of a fortune, I should sink down upon my knees to lay it at your feet!"

Zoe averted her countenance, where the colour went and came in rapid transitions. It was evident that she knew not how to reply; and Meredith was not altogether sure whether she were offended or pleased by this sort of avowal he had just made. But that she experienced one or the other of those feelings, he had no doubt: for indifferent and unruffled she assuredly was not.

"If I have offended you, Miss Armytage," he went on to say, speaking tremulously, "I should be bitterly irritated against myself. Tell me—have I offended you?"

"No, my lord," she answered, but in accents that were scarcely audible—while the transient glance which she threw upon the young nobleman, conveyed the first revelation he had ever yet obtained in respect to the real feeling with which the young lady regarded him.

"Then if I have not offended you," he said, "I may hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you? I have no fortune, Miss Armytage, to lay at your feet: but I have a loving and affectionate heart to offer you. Will you accept it?"—and he sank upon his knees before her.

Zoe, with her countenance still averted, and with the colour still coming and going rapidly upon her beauteous cheeks, made no verbal answer—but proffered him her hand. He took it, and conveyed it to his lips. But scarcely had those lips touched it, when she gently but firmly disengaged it; and rising from her seat, said in a low but clear voice, "My lord, I must now refer you to my father——Perhaps I ought to have done so in the first instance," she added more gently still.

Octavian had started up from his knees, smitten with the apprehension that he had been too bold in kissing the beautiful white hand which was proffered him, and that the young lady was offended: but he saw by her looks that it was not so. Her conduct was merely that of maiden dignity and of filial obedience; so that all in a moment she rose a thousand times higher in his estimation, if possible, than she had previously stood—highly as he had esteemed her before.

"But I may tell Mr. Armytage," he said, gazing tenderly upon her, "that your consent is already obtained, if his be vouchsafed?"

"It would be on my part, my lord, a ridiculous affectation," responded Zoe, in a voice that was tremulously clear; but yet she spoke with downcast eyes and with a modest confusion bashfully blending with her firmness,—"an affectation insulting, too, to the minds of both of us, were I to declare that you are an object of indifference to me. You have my consent, if you obtain my father's. And think not, my lord, that I fail to appreciate the honour which you confer upon me—the perhaps too flattering compliment which you pay me——"

"Zoe—dearest Zoe!" exclaimed Octavian, "never did you seem more charming in my eyes! never was your conduct more admirable than at this moment! If your father will consent to our union, I swear that your happiness shall henceforth prove the study of my life!"

Again he took her hand—again he pressed it to his lips—and it was not withdrawn—but then he retained it only for a single instant; and bending upon the lovely blushing girl a look of tenderness, he issued from the room. The moment the door closed behind him, Zoe sank upon the sofa whence she had risen up,—murmuring to herself with a sensation of holy rapture, "He loves me! he loves me!"

Yes—Octavian Meredith had all along been the object of Zoe's secret and hidden affection; and thus the designs of her father were, by an extraordinary coincidence, forwarded by her own feelings. We denominate it *extraordinary*, because let the reader reflect how seldom it is in real life that where a parent has from selfish or sordid motives fixed upon a particular individual to become his son-in-law, the daughter's own heart has the whole time been acquiescing in the choice. It was however so on the present occasion; and though Miss Armytage was not of a disposition to abandon herself to a feverish and unnatural excitement—though her mind was too strong and her temperament too placid for such inordinate agitation—yet it would be wrong to imagine, and would indeed be stamping her as deficient in the softness of feminine feeling, if we were to say that her heart fluttered not at all. It did palpitate with a considerable degree of suspense; but her emotions betrayed themselves not outwardly with much violence: yet it was not through any habitual dissimulation nor studied hypocrisy that they were concealed. No—she was all guileless innocence and unsophisticated ingenuousness: but her disposition, as already stated, was naturally calm—her feelings sank deep down and bubbled up but little to the surface—and they were the purer, the more genuine, and the more lasting on that very account.

She was not kept long in a state of uncertainty. In about half-an-hour the door opened, and Octavian hastened into her presence again, his countenance beaming with rapture and delight, not unmingled with astonishment. The result of his interview with Mr. Armytage was thus at once proclaimed, even before a single syllable fell from his lips; and now Zoe no longer withdrew her hand when he sought to retain it—nor did she with a prudish affectation hold back her countenance from the kiss which her accepted lover imprinted on her pure chaste forehead.

Octavian might well be astonished at the assent which he had received from Mr. Armytage: for notwithstanding the reasoning of the Duke of Marchmont, he had scarcely anticipated that a man whom he knew to be so worldly-minded as Zoe's father, would with a comparative readiness afford his acquiescence to the suit of a portionless lover. But then Mr. Armytage had given an affirmative response in that specious manner which he was so proficient in adopting. He had thrown out a hint to the effect that he had never sought for his daughter an alliance with mere rank, but had hoped that she would become the wife of some individual more in her own sphere.

"However," he had gone on to observe, "Zoe is an only child; and I am too fondly devoted to her to thwart her happiness in a single respect. You say, my lord, that she loves you; and therefore you have my concurrence. All my earthly aims are concentrated in the ensurance of my beloved Zoe's felicity. Without being considered guilty of too much paternal pride, I may safely assert that I bestow upon you a veritable treasure. See that you treat her kindly, my lord: show me that you appreciate the precious gift which I now declare to be your's: and I shall know how to express my gratitude."

Lord Octavian made suitable acknowledgments; and he was completely deceived by the specious language used by Mr. Armytage on this occasion—so that he thought to himself that Zoe's father must in reality possess an excellent heart notwithstanding his worldly-minded pursuits. Before he and Mr. Armytage separated on that occasion, the latter gave the young nobleman to understand the amount of the dowry he purposed to give his daughter—the mode of its settlement—and the allowance that would be made to Octavian himself. To all these proposals Meredith assented with a readiness which originated from his own earnest straining to convince himself as well as others, that he was unbiassed by interested views in the matter. Then Mr. Armytage hinted that if the young nobleman had any debts they should at once be liquidated: but to this offer Octavian was enabled to give a proud negative, he having no pecuniary liabilities. We do not mean that the pride of that response was of an aristocratic nature: it was the pride of one who felt that he might assume a manly dignity in proclaiming the rectitude of his conduct, which had been proof against all the temptations to extravagance by which he had of late been surrounded.

But if Octavian went away from that interview in astonishment at the apparently frank, noble-minded, and fondly paternal behaviour of Mr. Armytage,—not the less astonished was Mr. Armytage himself to learn that Zoe loved her noble suitor. However, he did not waste much time in pondering upon this matter: it was sufficient for him that Zoe had thus by her own conduct fallen into the views which he had entertained on her behalf; and he sped away to Belgrave Square, to inform the Duke of Marchmont of all that had just taken place.

A month afterwards,—namely, at the end of August, 1847—the bridal took place. Mr. Armytage insisted that it should be solemnised with all possible circumstances of splendour; and immense therefore were the preparations made for the occasion. Zoe would gladly have gone to the altar under circumstances far less ostentatious: but she had never been in the habit of disputing her sire's will—and she was by no means likely to do so while entertaining the belief that he had put all selfish considerations aside through a fond regard for her happiness wholly and solely. She accordingly suffered the arrangements to progress without the slightest remonstrance on her part,—reserving to herself the privilege of settling the precise details of her toilet, which she was resolved should be characterized by that elegant simplicity which was most congenial to her taste and disposition. The wedding-breakfast was to be a perfect banquet; and as if Mr. Armytage did not already possess plate sufficient, he expended two or three thousand pounds in the purchase of additional table-ornaments to be used on the occasion. The invitations were likewise more numerous than Zoe would have preferred, if left to her own choice: but herein again she quietly let her father have his own way. The Duke of Marchmont faithfully promised to attend at the wedding-breakfast; and Mr. Armytage, satisfied with this pledge, readily excused his Grace from accompanying the bridal party to the church.

On the eve of the day fixed for the ceremony, Mr. Armytage was seized with a violent fit of the gout; and his physicians positively forbade him from attempting to stir out of doors. Zoe, deeply afflicted at this circumstance, besought her sire to postpone the wedding: but he would not listen to it. All the preparations were fully made; and he was determined that the ceremony should take place. Zoe still renewed her entreaties: but in the midst of this discussion Octavian Meredith himself arrived,—his countenance beaming with the satisfaction of one who had good intelligence to impart. He was however for a moment saddened on perceiving Mr. Armytage sitting in an easy-chair with one of his legs hugely bandaged up,—saddened too likewise, because he beheld the tears trickling down Zoe's cheeks. The intelligence he had to communicate was to the effect that the invitations, which as a matter of courtesy had been forwarded to his father and his two brothers, were all accepted; and he himself had brought the written replies, addressed to Mr. Armytage. They were couched in courteous terms; and Octavian explained that he was now completely reconciled to his relatives. If any circumstance had been wanting to support the resolution of Mr. Armytage that the bridal should take place on the morrow, notwithstanding his own indisposition,—it was the intelligence Octavian had just imparted. Zoe, perceiving farther remonstrance to be vain, yielded to her sire's will; and her grief at his illness was mitigated not only by the assurance that he should be enabled to preside at the wedding-breakfast, but also by the satisfaction which he and she alike experienced at Octavian's reconciliation with his family.

On the following morning the bridal was celebrated. The Marquis of Penshurst—a tall, thin, pale old man—accompanied by his two elder sons, arrived at the mansion at an early hour; and though they were but little more than coldly courteous to Mr. Armytage, they were on the other hand exceedingly affable and cordial towards Zoe, whose beauty and inobtrusive manners made an immediate impression upon them. The Marquis of Penshurst gave Mr. Armytage to understand that he had converted the allowance of five hundred a-year made to Octavian, into a permanent settlement; and that he had moreover presented the young bridegroom with a thousand guineas, duly paid over to his account at the bankers'.

Two young ladies of rank acted as bridemaids; and an Earl undertook to give the bride away, as her father was unable to proceed to the church. The ceremony was solemnized at All Souls, in the fashionable quarter of Langham Place; and we must content ourselves with observing that the bride looked ravishingly beautiful as well as sweetly interesting. The wedding-breakfast fulfilled, in its sumptuous display of plate and in its profusion of all the choicest delicacies, the intents and wishes of the ostentatious Mr. Armytage: the Duke of Marchmont, faithful to his promise, was amongst the guests, who were described in the newspaper-paragraphs of the following morning as being "the *elite* of the fashionable world." When the repast was over, Zoe—having taken an affectionate and tearful leave of her parent—was handed by the bridegroom to the handsome carriage presented to the young couple by the bride's father; and they set off to spend the honeymoon at some watering-place, where a suitable house had been already engaged for their reception.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTINA.

Six weeks had elapsed since the bridal ceremony: it was now the middle of October—and the young couple, having returned to London, took possession of a house in Regent's Park, on the side exactly facing the abode of Mr. Armytage. Zoe naturally wished to be near her father, whom she might thus see daily—or at least very often; and Lord Octavian Meredith, having no particular choice as to the place of his residence, cheerfully carried out the wishes of his beauteous bride. During the honeymoon he had found no reason to be disappointed in the estimate which he had previously formed of Zoe's intellect, temper, and disposition. All the excellent traits of her mind—and she had no bad ones—developed themselves in a manner full well calculated to rivet her husband's affections, if they were susceptible of such adhesion unto her. She was all gentleness and amiability, candour and truthfulness, ingenuousness and innocence. Her love, being crowned by happiness, appeared to render her beauty more angelically fascinating—if indeed there had been any room for such enhancement of her charms. In short, Lord Octavian Meredith had every reason to be the happiest and most contented of men.

One afternoon, a few days after the return of the young couple from the watering-place, Lord Octavian had occasion to call upon Mr. Armytage on some little business connected with the settlement of Zoe's dowry. We should observe that during the interval since the marriage, Mr. Armytage had entirely recovered from his attack of gout, and had become as bustling and active as ever. The business between himself and his son-in-law was speedily concluded; and Octavian took his leave, to retrace his way on foot across the Park to his own dwelling. He was walking along that road which, diverging from the main one near the Colosseum, leads to the inner circle, when his attention was suddenly drawn to a scene that was taking place a little way ahead. A gentleman, having caught the hand of a young female genteelly but simply dressed, was endeavouring to retain it against her will—and was doubtless addressing her in a style of language which excited her virtuous indignation; for as she struggled to release her hand from his grasp, her ejaculations of angered remonstrance reached Octavian's ear. But, Ah! that figure—he recognised it in a moment!—and darting forward, reached the spot swift as an arrow shot from a bow. The gentleman—a gentleman in name only, but not in conduct—was at once stricken to the ground by the chivalrous and indignant Meredith: for it is only fair to observe that if the young person who was the object of the genteel ruffian's outrage, had been an utter stranger to him, he would have acted in precisely the same manner.

The discomfited individual started up from the ground in a furious rage,—exclaiming, "By heaven, sir! whoever you are, you shall give me satisfaction for this insult!"

"It is you who have perpetrated the insult against a well-behaved young lady," was Octavian's coldly dignified response, "and you have received your punishment. If in addition to this chastisement, you require any other, depend upon it you shall receive it at my hands. Here is my card."

"Very good," responded the other, without even glancing at the card which Octavian handed him. "You shall hear from me!"—and with these words, he walked hastily away, brushing off the dust from the sleeve of his coat.

Let us pause for a few minutes to describe the young female whom Meredith had thus delivered from the stranger's audacious conduct, and in whom he recognised the beauteous unknown who has been before alluded to. Beautiful she indeed was, as the reader has been prepared to learn: youthful too—for she did not appear to be more than sixteen or seventeen years of age. Though slender in figure, the symmetry of her proportions constituted a rare model of developing charms. Her countenance was pale—but it was the paleness of beauty and of health: not the dull dead whiteness of the skin, but the purest complexion with a vital animation upon it. Her eyes were large and dark: their naturally lustrous beaming was somewhat subdued by an innate modest bashfulness, and partially veiled by the long ebon lashes that fringed them. Her hair was of the very darkest shade—not that of dull lustreless jet; but that of the shining glossiness of the raven's plumage. It was not merely luxuriant, but of silken softness: and it fell not in ringlets, but in more massive tresses on either side of her beautiful countenance. The rosy hue of the lips set off teeth of a dazzling polish and faultlessly even. When beheld in her quiet moments—for she was now naturally excited by the scene which we have just described—there was a stamp of so much guileless truthfulness and virginal innocence about her, that it was a wonder even the most daring libertine could for a single instant have been so thoroughly mistaken in her character and disposition as to suppose that she would listen to his overtures. Still speaking of her in her tranquil moments, we may add that there was a slight settled shade of melancholy—or perhaps rather of pensiveness, on her beautiful countenance: yet this, in no way detracting from the charms which invested her, only perhaps undefinably enhanced them. We have already said that she was plainly but neatly dressed; and there was a natural grace in every movement and in every gesture of this sweet girl. Her eyes, though bright, had none of passion's fire in them: on the contrary, there was something of dove-like mildness in her looks, if such an expression can be applied to the darkest eyes as well as to those of blue. The outline of her countenance was purely Grecian: and the upper lip had that short rich curl which with some women is the type of high birth—with others an evidence of that instinctive feminine dignity which disdains falsehood and is incapable of guile.

Such was the interesting creature with whom Lord Octavian Meredith now suddenly found himself alone. At the instant that he had rushed up to the spot, her countenance was crimsoned with indignation and a sense of outraged virtue: the next moment, when the audacious libertine was stricken down to the earth, the colour fled from her cheeks, leaving them marble pale. She staggered against the railings which skirted the pathway of the road, and endeavoured to compose herself, so as to make suitable acknowledgments to her deliverer: but when she heard the libertine who had insulted her, using threatening terms, talking of satisfaction, and declaring that her defender should hear from him, the proceeding assumed a significancy which, inexperienced as the young girl was in the ways of the world, nevertheless sent the thought flashing into her mind that a duel would possibly be the result of the occurrence. A mortal terror accordingly seized upon her: for to this innocent and pure-minded being it seemed shocking to a degree that two human lives should be thus risked on her account, and one of them the life of her gallant deliverer.

Lord Octavian Meredith turned towards the beautiful stranger, and expressed his hope that she was now recovering from the terror into which the incident had plunged her.

"A thousand thanks to you, sir," she answered, in a tremulously murmuring voice, "for your generous behaviour. But did I rightly interpret the words which that rude person uttered? Oh, sir!" she continued, an expression of more than grief—for it amounted to a positive anguish, appearing upon her countenance as she raised her fine dark eyes towards Octavian Meredith,—"I beseech—I implore that no life may be risked——"

"Tranquillise your fears," interrupted the young nobleman, in the gentlest and most soothing tones of his naturally harmonious voice. "The man who could thus insult such a one as you, must be in his heart a coward; and even should he, through fear of the world's scorn, dare me to a duel, rest assured that I will chastise him."

"Good heavens!" murmured the young girl, all her worst fears being thus frightfully confirmed: "you will risk your life!"

"Is it indeed a matter of interest to you that I should take heed of my own safety?"—and in putting this question, Octavian Meredith was irresistibly carried away by those feelings which he had originally experienced towards the lovely unknown, and which were now resuscitated more vividly than ever.

"Can you ask me, sir," she said, still speaking murmuringly, and tremulously, and with affliction in her looks,—"can you ask me if it be a subject of consequence whether lives are to be hazarded? —— Oh! the bare thought is shocking!"—and under the influence of overpowering feelings, she laid her hand upon Meredith's arm, gazing up entreatingly into his countenance as she exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, accept not the defiance of that man whose conduct has placed him utterly beneath your notice!"

The touch of that beautiful girl's hand—light though it were, and gloved though the hand itself was—sent a thrill of unknown pleasure through the entire form of Octavian Meredith. He experienced feelings such as he had never experienced in respect to Zoe; so that with the rapidity of lightning did the conviction flash to his mind that he had deceived himself as to his real sentiments in respect to her who had become his wife, and that he loved her not as he now felt he loved the dark-eyed, raven-haired being who was before him. This conviction caused him to experience a strong sensation of anguish, which instantaneously followed upon the thrill of pleasure the light touch of her hand had sent with electrifying effect through his entire being. He comprehended all in a moment that his happiness was wrecked by the circumstance of having wedded another: and in a paroxysm of irrepressible emotion, he raised his hand to his brow.

"Ah! you yourself, sir, are smitten with horror at the thought of being placed in a position to take the life of a fellow-creature!"—and the young girl, thus very naturally mistaking the cause of his excitement, clasped her hands entreatingly as she went on to exclaim, "Tell me that you will not accept that bad man's defiance! Pardon this importunity on my part—but believe me, it would make me very, very wretched indeed!"

The nature of this colloquy—the close contact into which it brought Meredith and the lovely stranger—the variations of feeling and emotion which the circumstances developed on her part,—all contributed to display her beauty in different lights, and to afford him a reading into the innocence, the generosity, and the kindness of her soul. If he had felt himself attracted towards her on those few occasions when he had casually passed her in the street, when he had neither spoken to her nor heard the sound of her voice, and had only obtained transient glimpses of her charms,—how much more deeply was he interested in her now that she was there close to him—that he could look into the depths of her fine dark eyes—that he beheld the pearly whiteness of her teeth—that he had leisure to examine every feature of her beauteous face—and that a glance rapidly wandering over her figure, confirmed his previous impression of its exquisite symmetry, promising admirable developments—and when, too, her pure breath fanned his very cheek, as under the influence of her feelings she besought him to abstain from the threatened duel! Zoe was forgotten—or if not absolutely forgotten, remembered only as one to whom he had indissolubly linked himself, and who thus stood as a barrier in the way of the crowning happiness of the real love which he experienced. Then too flashed to the mind of the young man the sickening conviction that despite all his sophistical reasonings at the time, he had literally and actually sold himself for Armytage's wealth: whereas, on the other hand, he felt that he could have been content to inhabit the humblest residence, if it were shared by this beauteous being who was now before him.

Such were the feelings and thoughts conjured up all in a moment in the mind of Lord Octavian Meredith, as the charming stranger continued her appeals. For an instant he had flattered himself that these appeals arose from a tender interest which she herself experienced in him: but he had quickly seen, by her answer to that question which he had put, that her entreaties arose merely from a sense of duty and gratitude towards a fellow-creature who had behaved nobly on her behalf.

"Will you not promise me," she said, "that this menaced duel shall not take place?"

"Yes, yes—I promise you," he responded quickly, in order to tranquillize her fears—though without having the intention of keeping the pledge if the threatened satisfaction should be demanded.

"Ah, sir!" persisted the young girl, who, artless and unsophisticated though she were, was nevertheless not to be deceived by an assurance which was belied by her deliverer's look and manner: "you only tell me this to set my mind at ease. Oh, I understand!" she exclaimed, a light suddenly breaking in upon her soul: "you will be forced to obey those false and unnatural laws which society denominates the code of honour! But it shall not be so," she added, abruptly regaining a degree of firmness, and her countenance expressing a promptly-taken resolution. "You have acted generously towards me: I will perform my duty towards you."

"What do you mean?" cried Meredith, in astonishment.

"Will you let me know, sir," inquired the young girl, timidly and bashfully, "the name of him to whom I am under such deep obligations?"

Octavian now understood her in a moment. She purposed to give the proper authorities notice that a duel was to take place; and she hoped that by adopting this course, she would prevent it without suffering his own honour to be compromised. But in the first place, Octavian was no coward—and indeed thought lightly of the prospect of the impending duel; and in the second place he saw that if the authorities were to interfere to prevent it, the worst construction would be put on such a result by his antagonist, who would doubtless proclaim to the world that Meredith himself had deliberately prompted the young girl to give private intimation to the magistrate. So rapidly did all these thoughts flash through his mind, that there was no apparent interval of hesitation or reflection on his part, ere he replied to the query she had put, by saying in a collected off-hand manner, "My name is Richard Percival!"

"Then, Mr. Percival," immediately added the young girl, "accept my gratitude for your generous conduct towards me."

With a graceful inclination of the head, she was hastening away: but Octavian was almost immediately by her side, saying, "Will you not suffer me to learn who it is to whom I have been enabled to render the service which is deemed deserving of thanks?"

The young girl stopped short, and reflected gravely for a few moments. It was evident enough that she was deliberating whether she should tell her name: it was also evident that she feared it would savour of ingratitude and actual rudeness to decline;—for she at length observed slowly, "You have a right to ask this question, sir. My name is Christina Ashton."

"Then, Miss Ashton," at once responded Lord Octavian Meredith, "you will permit me to escort you to your own residence, for fear lest you should again encounter any individual who, wearing the garb of a gentleman, possesses the attributes of a ruffian, and is unable to appreciate the innocence and the respectability which ought to be a sufficient shield against such treatment as you are now experienced."

"I should be sorry, Mr. Percival," answered the maiden, "to engross any more of your time. Pray suffer me to continue my way alone."

"Miss Ashton, I have read your thoughts—I have fathomed your intentions!" exclaimed Meredith. "You are going straight hence to a magistrate——Now, if I promise faithfully that I will not engage in a duel——"

"Alas, sir!" said Christina, "you cannot dispose of your own actions in this matter. I have read in books of that false code of honour which, belonging to a bygone barbarism, has been engrafted upon our modern civilisation——"

"Miss Ashton, I entreat you not to take the step which you meditate!" interrupted Octavian. "Do you know that you would expose me to something far worse than the hazard of losing my life? —you would expose me to that of losing my honour? The world would call me coward; and I swear unto you that in spite of all the magisterial and police authority, I would vindicate my reputation and my character!"

"Ah, is it so?" murmured Christina mournfully: for she was smitten with the truth of what her deliverer had just said.

"You see therefore, Miss Ashton," resumed Octavian, "that if actually challenged by that person, I must go out with him. I will no longer attempt to deceive you: for such is the real truth. Do not however be alarmed on my account. If mortally wounded, I should in my last moments be rejoiced to think that I had rendered a service to an amiable young lady such as you are."

The tears started into Christina's eyes at the bare thought of a fellow-creature's existence—perhaps a most valuable one—being jeopardised or lost on her account; and moreover, for a naturally sensitive disposition and for a feeling heart, there was something irresistibly touching in the tone and manner in which Octavian had last addressed her. She still lingered,—forgetful in the agitation of her mind that the interview had already been too much prolonged, considering that she was standing there conversing with one who was almost a total stranger to her: for we should state that though she herself had on former occasions been noticed by Meredith, she had never observed him. Indeed, so far as she was concerned, she did not recollect having ever seen him before the present occasion.

"You perceive, therefore, Miss Ashton," continued Meredith, "that you really must suffer this matter to take its course; and that you would be doing me a positive injury by any direct interference. At the same time, I fully appreciate the generosity of your motives; and I feel myself bound to offer that you shall be made acquainted with the result. If I fall in the impending duel, some friend of mine shall wait upon you with the intelligence: but if I survive, I will do myself the pleasure of calling, to convince you personally of my safety."

Had Christina Ashton been less inexperienced than she was in the ways of the world, she would have penetrated this somewhat insidious and perhaps not altogether handsome endeavour to draw from her lips an avowal of the place of her abode: but artless and guileless herself, she was unsuspicious of underhand dealings on the part of others. The same motive which had prompted her to mention her name, now at once instigated her to mention her address: and having hastily done so, she again bowed and continued her way.

Meredith had no longer the faintest shadow of an excuse for detaining her—though he would gladly have gone on lingering in conversation with a being whose beauty had made such a deep impression upon his heart. We must observe that these scenes had taken place in a portion of the Regent's Park which is seldom much frequented by persons either on foot or on horseback, even when the Park itself serves as a fashionable resort: but in the autumn season of the year the fashionable world were for the most part out of town—the Parks were well nigh deserted—and the particular spot where these incidents occurred, had not at the time a single individual passing that way, save and except Meredith, Christina, and the impudent libertine who had insulted her.

Octavian continued his way slowly towards his own house. On arriving there, he found the carriage in readiness, as he had promised to accompany Zoe for a drive. His first impulse was to make some excuse, as he wished to be alone with his own thoughts: but his natural generosity would not permit him to do this. He felt that he had no right to deprive his wife of his company, in consequence of any new or altered feelings which might have arisen within him—but that on the contrary, it was his duty to crush and stifle those feelings. This he earnestly resolved to do. He accompanied Zoe for the drive; and the various little evidences of the exquisite sweetness of her temper and the amiability of her disposition, which even the mere tenour of the conversation developed, filled him with remorseful feelings as he remembered all that had passed through his mind while he was with Christina. He forced himself to appear gay; and the unsuspecting Zoe fancied not that there was in reality an abstraction and a pre-occupation beneath that cheerful surface. He said nothing to her relative to the adventure which might probably lead to a duel. In the first place, a husband seldom or never imparts to a wife the chance of such a casualty; and in the second place, Octavian felt that he could not touch upon the subject without betraying some emotion while speaking of Christina.

At about nine o'clock in the evening, as Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith were sitting together in their drawing-room, taking their coffee, a servant entered; and presenting a card to his master, intimated that the gentleman whose name it bore requested to see him.

"Ah, Captain Whitby," said Octavian, with an air of assumed carelessness, so as to prevent his wife from suspecting there was anything wrong. "I will come down to him at once:"—and when the footman had left the room, he observed in the same easy indifferent manner, "The Captain has come to inquire into the character of a man I had with me previous to our marriage."

Octavian then descended to the dining-room, where Captain Whitby was waiting to see him. The gallant officer had called on behalf of the Hon. Wilson Stanhope, which it appeared was the name of the individual from whose libertine outrage Octavian had rescued Miss Ashton. Meredith penned a hasty note to the Duke of Marchmont, requesting him to act as his second; and this note he begged Captain Whitby to bear to his Grace, who would arrange all preliminaries.

"I have named time and place in my letter, Captain Whitby," added Meredith; "and as a matter of course, all parties engaged will observe the strictest secrecy with regard to the proceedings."

"Such is also Mr. Stanhope's wish," responded the Captain. "Mr. Stanhope frankly confesses that under the influence of a champagne-breakfast, he behaved rudely to the girl; and therefore, my lord, a single word of apology on your part for the blow you struck, will prevent this hostile meeting."

"And that word, Captain Whitby, will not be spoken by my lips," rejoined Meredith.

The Captain bowed and took his leave; while Octavian rejoined Zoe, who still saw nothing in his look or manner to create in her mind the slightest suspicion of what was going on.

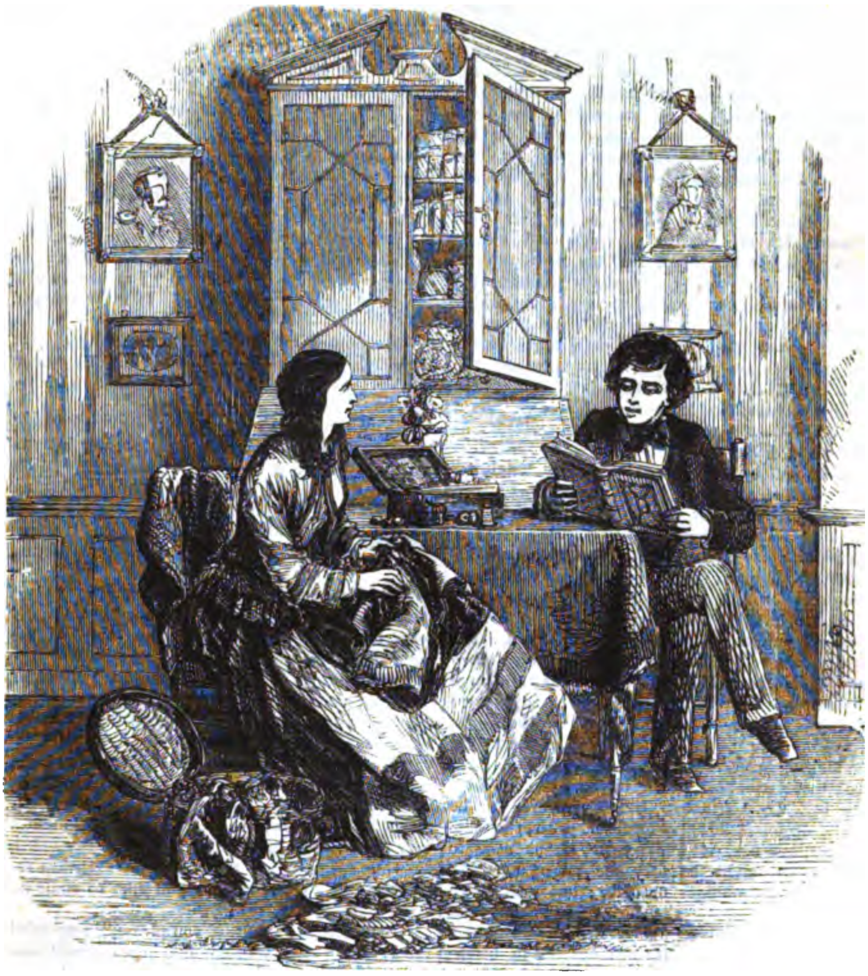
It is not our purpose to give a detailed description of the duel. Suffice it to say that Octavian rose at an earlier hour than usual,—alleging that the fineness of the morning tempted him to a ride on horseback before breakfast; and having embraced Zoe, he took his departure. Mounted on his steed, and having dispensed with the attendance of his groom, he galloped to the place of meeting, where the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the same moment. A few minutes afterwards the Hon. Wilson Stanhope and Captain Whitby appeared upon the ground. They had brought a surgeon with them: but he remained in their carriage at a little distance. Shots were exchanged, neither party receiving any injury; and Mr. Stanhope declared that he was satisfied. The two principals then shook hands in the approved manner; and thus in five minutes all was over. Ere separating, it was agreed by those concerned that the utmost secrecy should be observed in respect to the affair; and thus not even a whisper transpired to reach a reporter's ears and engender a paragraph in the public journals.

Lord Octavian Meredith reached home at the usual breakfast-hour; and Zoe still remained without the slightest suspicion that her dearly beloved husband's life had been risked in a duel. We may add, ere closing this chapter, that Meredith had been compelled to inform his friend the Duke of Marchmont of the name and address of Miss Ashton: so that in case he had fallen, his promise might be kept, and the intelligence conveyed to the young lady. But Octavian had not chosen to confess that this Miss Ashton was the very self-same beauteous unknown of whom he had made mention when consulting the Duke in regard to his prospects, as described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LODGING-HOUSE.

In Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, a respectable lodging-house was kept by a widow-woman named Macaulay. She was about fifty years of age—short and stout—yet bustling and active; very untidy and dirty in her appearance during all the earlier part of the day—but dressed out in a very fine style for the afternoon and evening. She was a Scotch woman—exceedingly thrifty, and bent upon saving a penny here and a penny there to the utmost of her power. She therefore assisted the servants in the house-work and the kitchen: hence her morning's untidiness. But when



the onerous duties of the day were over, Mrs. Macaulay sported her silk gown, her cap with pink ribands, her gold watch and chain—and seated herself in her neat little ground-floor parlour, ready to receive any of her neighbours who might chance to drop in for a chat. Though parsimonious even to meanness—beating down her drudges of servants to the lowest possible amount of wages—she was an honest woman in her way, and made as little free with her lodgers' tea and sugar, butter, and other comestibles, as the most conscientious of her class. Neither did she altogether possess a bad heart, though it was steeled with many defences against accessibility with regard to money-matters She would not mind sitting up all night long to nurse a sick lodger: but she would not at all like to hear the lodger, when rent-day came round, make an excuse for non-payment. Her landlord came to her regularly for his rent; and she therefore must have her's. The tax-gatherers were equally exact in their periodical visits; and she was compelled, as she alleged, to require a corresponding punctuality on the part of her tenants. Such was Mrs. Macaulay—a woman with whom lodgers were certain to remain on the best possible terms so long as their weekly bills were settled with regularity.

The ground-floor, consisting of two rooms, was occupied by herself,—the front being her parlour, the back her bed-chamber. The first floor was very handsomely furnished, and was sure to be "well let," as Mrs. Macaulay termed it, in the season—perhaps to a Member of Parliament, whose regular residence was in the country. The second floor was far more plainly appointed, but still comfortable enough; and above were the chambers of the servants—with a spare one in case the first-floor lodger should have a servant of his own.

It was about ten o'clock in the forenoon on the very day that the duel took place, that a tall man, of gentlemanly appearance, and well though plainly dressed—that is to say, his apparel was genteel and of good materials, but without pretension—passed slowly along Mortimer Street; and observing a card in a window, announcing a first floor to let ready furnished, he knocked at the door. On one of the servants answering it, he requested to look at the rooms; and he was in the first instance shown into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour, while that respectable female "tidied herself up a bit"—to use her own phrase. Having washed her face and hands, slipped on her silk gown and her cap with pink ribands, Mrs. Macaulay entered the parlour, with a simpering mien and a half-curtsey. She prided herself upon being an excellent physiognomist: for she always scrutinized well every applicant for her lodgings—so that she might calculate the chances of being paid her rent, or of having her tenants decamp suddenly some fine day. As a matter of course such disagreeable incidents as these had been within the range of her experience; and by treasuring up in her mind the countenances of the delinquents, she regarded them as criterions for the formation of her judgment in future. Therefore, on entering into the presence of the gentleman to whom we have alluded, she studied him with all the keenness of her perception, yet without appearing to do so.

As we have said, he was of tall stature: we may add that he was of commanding aspect. His hair, which was of an iron gray, was worn much away from above the forehead, and was thin upon the crown. His whiskers, which were large, were a shade darker—yet quite gray at the roots. Handsome he might be considered, so far as the profile was concerned: but he had a cold stern look that was almost saturnine, and which chilled the beholder. His complexion appeared to be made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun. As for his age, it was by no means easy to fix it: he might be fifty—he might even be several years younger or older; but that which might have led to the former inference, was that he possessed a fine set of teeth which were well preserved. He was dressed in black; and over his shoulders there hung loosely a dark blue cloak. Though it was only the middle of October, the weather was still warmly genial, and the landlady therefore concluded he was an invalid or had lately been one, and thus sought to protect himself against the chance of taking cold. From the result of her survey, she could not exactly make up her mind as to whether she liked his appearance or not. He had the air of a gentleman: but then that cold severe stern look of his troubled and bewildered her. Besides, was not the Polish Count with an awful long name, and who turned out to be no Count at all, but only a wild Irish adventurer, and who had run away five pounds in her debt,—was not he a very gentlemanly man? while, on the other hand, did she not decline to receive as a lodger an elderly person, merely on account of his haughtily stern look—and had not this very individual lived for the last ten years with Mrs. Sifkin over the way, paying his rent as regularly as clock-work, and never venturing a hint that his tea and sugar disappeared rapidly, or that somehow or another something was always wanted though a store of it had been laid in only a day or two back? Therefore, it was no wonder if worthy Mrs. Macaulay was puzzled how to act in the present instance, and that the tall gentleman's countenance was one which seemed to defy her skill as a physiognomist.

"I see that you have apartments to let," he said: and the mildness of his voice, rich however in its sonorous harmony, and tinctured with a deep mournfulness, almost made her start: for she had expected that naught but the sternest accents could issue from those lips.

"Yes, sir," she responded, cheering up considerably, and again putting on the invariable simper of an obliging landlady: "I think you will find them excellent apartments. Is it for yourself and lady—or——"

"For myself only," replied the stranger; and he made a motion towards the door, as if impatient to view the apartments without further delay or discourse.

"I will show you the rooms, sir," continued Mrs. Macaulay: and as she led the way up the stairs, she muttered to herself, "Heavens! there's a broom where a broom should not be!" and then as she reached the landing, she suddenly opened a closet-door and thrust a pail into it, still muttering, "That slut Betsy! what can she be thinking of?"

The apartments were duly shown: the stranger merely flung a single glance round the drawing-room and the bed-chamber, which were on the same level—and expressed himself satisfied.

"The rent, sir, is four guineas a week—of course including attendance," said Mrs. Macaulay: "but for this sum you have a chamber up-stairs, in case you keep a servant of your own."

"I have none—and do not mean to keep any," answered the gentleman.

"Very good, sir—just as you think fit!" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. "You will find mine a very quiet house; and I need not say," she added, drawing herself up, "that it is of first-rate respectability. When should you like to come in, sir?"

"A word or two first, if you please," responded the stranger. "I am somewhat of an invalid, and seek quiet apartments. Have you any other lodgers in the house?"

"The floor above is let, sir—but to the nicest, quietest young people that you could wish to see."

"Have they children?" asked the stranger.

"They are brother and sister, sir," rejoined Mrs. Macaulay,—"quite young folks, and highly respectable: for they have never once missed paying their rent since they have been here—which is upwards of six months. They go up and down stairs as quiet as mice——"

"And you have no other lodgers?"

"None, sir. If you take these rooms, my lodgings will all be occupied. I only let out these two floors."

"Then I will take the apartments," said the gentleman; "and I shall come hither at once. My trunk is at an hotel hard by: I will go and send it——"

"Perhaps, sir," interposed Mrs. Macaulay, as the stranger was advancing to the door—and she spoke in a mild tone of subdued deprecation, as much as to imply that he must not take offence at what she was about to say,—"perhaps you will favour me with a reference?"

"I have none to give—I am acquainted with no one in London—I am a total stranger here. But whatsoever sum in advance you require, you may have:"—and as the stranger thus spoke, he drew forth a well-filled purse.

"That is not exactly, sir, the same thing," observed Mrs. Macaulay: for she thought to herself, "Did not the gentleman with the red hair, who was no gentleman after all, pay me a fortnight in advance, and then manage to run into my debt ten pounds, in spite of all I could do? and when I asked him for a settlement, did he not run away with my plated coffee-pot and six silver spoons?"—so as the worthy landlady hastily reviewed these circumstances in her past experience, she was resolved to take warning therefrom in her present dealings.

"I am not offended," replied the stranger, in his mild gentlemanly voice, "that you should seek guarantees for the respectability of those who take apartments beneath your roof. Your conduct is in itself a guarantee that your house is a repectable one. I tell you again that I am a perfect stranger in London: but if you will call at the great bankers' in the Strand"—and he named the firm to which he alluded—"they will, I think, give you every satisfactory information. The apartments suit me; and as I have taken the trouble to look at them, and have given you the trouble to show them, I have no inclination to go searching elsewhere."

"I am very much obliged, sir," answered Mrs. Macaulay, now cheering up once more: "such a reference will be highly satisfactory. What name, if you please, sir?"

"Make your inquiries relative to Mr. Redcliffe," rejoined the gentleman: and he thereupon took his departure.

Mrs. Macaulay lost not a moment in proceeding to the bankers'; and on putting the inquiry to one of the clerks at the counter, she was referred to a gentleman in an inner room. She did not much like this, and again her spirits fell: for she thought that if her would-be lodger had an account at the bank, the clerks must all be prepared to answer any inquiries. However, she put her question to the gentleman to whom she was thus introduced in the private room; and he, having listened to her, gravely turned over the leaves of a huge book which lay open before him.

"I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe," he at length said.

"Then I am robbed of my time, and should have been swindled out of my rent!" ejaculated the irate Mrs. Macaulay. "Who knows but that he would have walked off with another coffee-pot and another six silver spoons?"

"Stop, stop, my good woman!" interrupted the banker, with an imperious wave of his pen: "you should have patience. I was going to say that I know nothing of Mr. Redcliffe personally—nor who he is—nor what he is. But this I *do* know—that I have upwards of one hundred thousand pounds in my hands, to the account of that gentleman."

"Ah, dear me!" said Mrs. Macaulay, scarcely able to speak through utter amazement. "A hundred thousand pounds!—and I who was afraid of my plated coffee-pot and my silver spoons!"

"I think, ma'am," resumed the banker, "that if you have Mr. Redcliffe as a lodger—always supposing him to be the same Clement Redcliffe whose name figures in my book—you run no risk of losing your coffee-pot or your silver spoons.

The banker then bowed slightly, but with the unmistakable air of a man who had no more to say, and whose time was precious. Mrs. Macaulay thereupon took her leave; and entering an omnibus, was borne in the direction of her own residence. But during the ride fresh misgivings gradually arose in the mind of this very cautious, and indeed suspicious woman. What if after all the individual who had taken her apartments, was not the real Clement Redcliffe? what if he were some swindler, who having learnt that a gentleman of such a name had money at the bank, but was not known there, had availed himself of such information to pass himself off as the veritable Mr. Redcliffe? She worked herself up to such a pitch of suspicion and mistrust that she was half-inclined to refuse to receive the gentleman. She thought it so odd that a man worth upwards of one hundred thousand pounds, should be without a single acquaintance in London. She could scarcely believe it was so; and therefore regarded it as an excuse on the part of an impostor for not giving any other reference than the one to the banker. But then, as she entered Mortimer Street—glanced at Mrs. Sifkins' over the way—and thought of how she had over-reached herself by her suspicions in respect to the old gentleman who had taken her rival's lodgings, had lived there for years, had paid his rent regularly, and never looked into his tea-caddy,—she endeavoured to reason herself against her present mistrust. In short, the result was that she decided in the gentleman's favour—though not without a lingering apprehension in her mind that she was doing wrong and that he would turn out a swindler after all. The new lodger's luggage presently arrived from the neighbouring hotel; and as Mrs. Macaulay was on the look-out for the porter who brought it, she beckoned the man into her parlour, gave him a glass of gin—not forgetting to take one herself likewise—and began to question him.

"Who is this Mr. Redcliffe?" she inquired.

"Don't know, ma'am, nothink about the gentleman—only that he has paid all the servants in a werry 'andsome manner."

"How long has he been at your hotel?"

"Why, he come fust of all a matter of six or seven weeks back, I should think, as near as I can recollect. But he only stayed a few days, and was shut up in his room looking over all the old files of newspapers he could possibly get hold of. We have filed the *Times* at our place for the last twenty year: and, bless me! if I don't think he must have read it all through—for he was always poring over it from morning to night. The head-waiter said as how he thought the gentleman was either a politician studying politics—or else fancied hisself to be the heir-at-law of a fortune, and was looking out for the advertisements to the next-of-kin—or else that he must have been abroad a many years, and on coming home wanted to see what had took place in his absence."

"How strange!" said Mrs. Macaulay: then as her own ideas always settled on money-matters, she added, "I will be bound it was the advertisements he was looking after—and that he has got his fortune, and that's the money that has been paid into the bankers'! Well, but you say he only stayed with you a few days first of all?"

"No more he did," responded the hotel-porter; "and he set off one day into the country with only a little carpet-bag, observing that he should be back in a short time. He did not pay his bill when he went away, but seemed desperate hurried. Five or six weeks passed, and the governor"—meaning the landlord—"began to think he was gammoned, and that the gentleman's great big trunk might only have brick-bats and straw in it arter all, and that he had took away his shirts and what not in the carpet-bag."

"And a very reasonable suspicion too," observed Mrs. Macaulay. "I should have entertained it long before the six weeks were up. But go on."

"Well, ma'am, it was on'y yesterday morning," continued the porter, "that the governor, finding his customer didn't come back, decided on breaking open the trunk; and he calls me to get a jimmy—that's a crow-bar, you know, ma'am—to do it. So, just as I was going up-stairs with the jimmy, a cab stops at the door; and who the deuce should walk in but Mr. Redcliffe, followed by the jarvey with the carpet-bag. So I slips the jimmy up my back, under my coat, and makes my bow as Mr. Redcliffe passes. Wasn't the governor glad that he hadn't come a few minutes later!—for if he had, the trunk would have been opened as sure as a gun."

"I know I should have opened it at the end of the first week," interjected Mrs. Macaulay. "Well, what next?"

"Why, ma'am, just now—about an hour back—Mr. Redcliffe rings and orders his bill. Now, don't you see, his trunk had been standing in his bed-room for the whole six weeks he had been absent: so of course the governor charges him for the use of the room the whole time. The waiter didn't much like taking up the bill—though he's got plenty of brass, that self-same waiter has. But Mr. Redcliffe just glanced at the amount, threw down some bank-notes, and paid the bill without an instant's hesitation."

"That's just what I like!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay, resolving that her own bills should not be stinted in items, and with a quick mental glance perceiving in a moment how a few little extras could easily be stuck on.

"And I'm blessed, ma'am," continued the hotel porter, "if Mr. Redcliffe didn't pay all the servants just as though he had been stopping at the hotel the whole six weeks."

"Take another glass of Hollands," exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay, becoming bounteous in her exuberant glee at having such a lodger, and in finding all her suspicions most completely allayed.

The man quaffed the strong waters—carried the huge trunk up-stairs—and then took his departure. Shortly afterwards Mr. Redcliffe made his appearance, and at once took possession of his apartments,—Mrs. Macaulay having in the meantime put on her Sunday apparel, including a new cap with pink ribbons, in order to give him the best welcome possible.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TWINS.

At the same time that Mr. Redcliffe thus arrived at his new lodging, the occupants of the second floor, to whom Mrs. Macaulay had alluded, were seated together at a table, on which were books and needlework. The room was tolerably well furnished for a second floor, and was at least quite comfortable. The two inmates were a brother and a sister; and even a superficial observer would have seen that they were twins. We need not enter into any lengthy description of the sister, inasmuch as we have already described her: for she was none other than that same Christina Ashton on whose account Lord Octavian Meredith fought a duel. We may however remind the reader that she appeared to be between sixteen and seventeen years of age, and that she was exquisitely beautiful.

Christina's brother was an exceedingly prepossessing youth: he had large dark eyes, similar to those of his sister; and though perhaps his hair was not of the same intense darkness, it nevertheless had an almost equally fine natural gloss upon it. Like herself, he possessed a superb set of teeth; and his countenance was pale—not with a sickly pallor, but with that absence of a florid hue which is usually characteristic of youthful faces when set off by dark hair and eyes. Christina's figure had as yet all the slenderness and willowy elasticity of her tender youthfulness,—at the same time promising to expand, as she approached more nearly to womanhood, into rich developments. The bust had already its nascent contours,—carefully concealed by the modest apparel which ascended to the very throat;—and that throat, how sweetly beautiful! how transparently white! The youth's figure was likewise slender, symmetrically formed, and promising as his own years also advanced, to be of well-knit manly proportions. There was a remarkable similitude between this brother and sister—not only in respect to personal appearance, but also with regard to their minds and dispositions. They had been well educated: they were naturally intelligent—and they had intellectual tastes. They were devoted to each other; and thus, when the sister was occupied with her needlework, the brother read to her from some book which was calculated to instruct as well as to amuse.

Over the countenances of both there was the slightest possible shade of pensiveness, which at times even deepened into melancholy: but when they caught this profounder expression on each other's face, they would instantaneously brighten up, as if it were a tacit consent between them that they should avoid mutually saddening influences. There is always something interesting about twins: there is sure to be a deep affection existing between them—and most generally a strong physical similitude: their tastes too, and the casts of their minds, generally have much about them that is identical:—but perhaps in no case were all these characteristics so profoundly stamped, so marked, so visible, as in that of which we are speaking. Very interesting therefore was this youthful pair; and as if nothing should be wanting to sustain the impression of their twin-condition, an identity of name had been observed with regard to them so far as the difference of the sex would permit: for the brother was denominated Christian, and the reader is already aware that the sister was called Christina.

We introduce them in the afternoon of the day following Christina Ashton's adventure in the Regent's Park—and therefore the same on which the duel had been fought in the morning. Christina had of course told her brother every particular—for they had no secrets from each other; and now, when occasionally glancing up from his book, he perceived that she was evidently somewhat restless and uneasy, he could full well divine the cause thereof. At first he forbore allusion to it,—fearing to rivet her thoughts too completely upon the subject: but when he observed her restlessness increasing, he laid down his book, and said in a plaintive voice, "I wish, dearest sister, that you were relieved from this anxiety."

"It is a dreadful thing, Christian," she responded mournfully, as the tears started into her beautiful dark eyes, "to reflect that lives have possibly been risked—and even lost—by this time, and entirely on my account."

"But did not Mr. Percival promise that you should be made acquainted with the result?" asked the brother: "and depend upon it, that if anything fatal had occurred we should know it by this time. Mr. Percival did not tell you where he resided, I think?—for if he had, I would go and make some inquiry in his neighbourhood."

"No," responded Christina: "he suspected that I purposed to inform the authorities and prevent the duel."

"Ah, my dear sister," exclaimed Christian, "it was the first time you ever went out alone during the whole six months we have been in London; and it shall be the last!"

"You were so occupied with your drawing, you know, Christian," answered his sister, "that I did not like to take you away from it; and as the Regent's Park is so near, I thought there was no harm for me to go alone as far as Mr. Preston's. Besides, you had forgotten that it was the day for receiving our monthly money; and so you were not ready dressed to go out. The hour had arrived when the money was to be called for; and you are aware how severe and particular—indeed how cross and stern Mr. Preston is, and how particular he was in enjoining us always to come to the very day and to the very hour—otherwise he should be offended."

"Well, my dear sister, another time," responded Christian, "I will be sure to recollect when pay-day comes round; and I will be ready to go out with you to the very hour. But I forgot to ask you—did Mr. Preston prove more communicative——"

"Than on former occasions?" asked Christina. "No—not at all. He was abrupt and hurried as he always is—curt enough, without being absolutely rude. I lingered with the intention of asking him a few questions: but he quickly bowed me out—and the servant was in readiness to open the front door."

"How I dislike all this mystery!" exclaimed Christian, the natural sweetness of his temper being for a moment ruffled by a vexation which may be understood from the remarks he went on to make. "I cannot lead a life of idleness. I long to be placed in some position that will enable me to earn something. If it be charity we are dependent upon, the sooner we escape from such a humiliating position, the better: but if it be that our dear deceased uncle, on dying so suddenly, left us some property, and that this Mr. Preston is his executor, and so to speak, our guardian—I wish he would tell us exactly how we are situated and what we have to rely upon—much or little. I am determined, Christina, that when the monthly pay-day comes round again, I will ask firmly—but of course respectfully—for some little information on these points."

"Yes—you shall do so, Christian," was the sister's response. "It was a year last Monday," she added, with a sigh, "that our dear uncle was smitten with death in so shocking a manner—and only last Monday therefore that we put off the mourning we had worn for him."

"And during all this time," added Christian, "we have learnt no more of the circumstances in which we were left by Mr. Ashton, than we knew on the very day of his demise—unless it be that Mr. Preston became in some way or another interested in our behalf. Ah! I hoped when, six months back, he sent for us to come up from our own pleasant little village to this great metropolis, that it was to do something for me—to give me a profession or an employment—to put me in a way to carve out for myself some career suitable to my tastes. But no!—nothing of the sort! Here we have been six months in these lodgings; and I am no farther advanced in my hopes than I was on the day of our arrival. But, Ah! I must not repine: it is perhaps wicked in me to do so: for we have enough to support us comfortably—and our wants being limited, twelve guineas a month are a little fortune."

"I am not sorry, dearest brother, to hear you speak now and then in a way which proves that you possess proper manly aspirations:"—and as Christina uttered these words, her looks were bent with inexpressible fondness, mingled with a sisterly admiration, upon Christian.

At this moment one of the servants of the household entered the room, and said, "Please, Miss, here's a gentleman inquiring for you. He says he is Mr. Percival."

"Then he is safe!" murmured Christina, with a look of profound thankfulness: while her brother bade the servant show the gentleman up.

But while Lord Octavian Meredith is ascending the stairs, we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to describe under what circumstances he still preserved his feigned name of Percival, and meant to retain it while visiting Christina. The reader already knows that he had all along been deeply enamoured of the young girl while she was still to him only "his fair unknown"—and that he had deluded himself in respect to the real nature of the sentiments which he experienced towards Zoe. That unexpected meeting with Christina in the Park, had torn the veil from his eyes, and had cleared his mental vision to the full perception of the grievous mistake he had made. In short, he could not conceal from himself that he was deeply attached to Christina Ashton—that he loved her with an enthusiasm it was un-possible for him to restrain; and though his duty towards Zoe, and his duty towards Christina herself, should have led him to avoid the dangers of another interview,—he had not the moral courage —he had not indeed sufficient control over himself, to resist the temptation of calling upon the object of his passion. To do the young nobleman justice, the idea of a deliberate seduction had not for a single instant entered his head:—in his infatuation he thought of nothing but the pleasure of beholding Christina again—of contemplating her beauty—of listening to the sweet music of her voice. Yet there was a whisper in his soul that this visit which he was now paying, would not be the last: for he could not possibly make up his mind to the bold and resolute step of avoiding her in future. Yet to announce his real name—to proclaim himself Lord Octavian Meredith—would be to furnish her with the means of ascertaining that he was already married,—a circumstance which an accident at any moment might bring to her knowledge. And if the truth did thus come to her ears, he could not again hope to be received by her: whereas, if disguised under the name of Percival, he might entertain the hope of being occasionally permitted to call in Mortimer Street. Thus it was without any deliberately wicked plan—without any positively settled design against the virtue of the young girl—but merely in obedience to an infatuation which he could not possibly control—Lord Octavian Meredith secured to himself the advantage which his feigned name gave him in the matter.

It was not until Meredith entered the young people's sitting-room, that he entertained any particular idea of whom he should find with Christina —whether she was living with parents or relatives—nor indeed in what circumstances she was placed,—save and except that he knew she had a brother, with whom he had seen her walking on a few occasions, as he had stated to the Duke of Marchmont. He had longed to ask the servant who opened the door, some few questions: but he was fearful that such curiosity, on being reported to those whom it concerned, would act prejudicially against him: and therefore he had abstained.

"According to my promise, Miss Ashton," he said, as he entered the apartment, "I am here to make you aware of my safety."

He extended his hand towards the young girl, who gave him her's with an ingenuous frankness: for she felt that she lay under a deep obligation to one who had delivered her from a gross insult —and who, by the very words which had just fallen from his lips, had evidently been compelled to risk his life on her account.

In the same artless manner she renewed her thanks for his chivalrous conduct; and timidly but sincerely expressed her delight that no serious consequences had ensued.

"None, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith. "I went out with Mr. Stanhope,—for that is the name of the gentleman who insulted you; and no harm was done. I need not ask if this be your brother:"—and thus speaking, he turned toward Christian, to whom he with well-bred affability proffered his hand,—which was accepted with all the frankness of unsuspicious youth.

Octavian sat down, and began conversing with the twins upon a variety of topics. He learnt from them that they had been six months in the metropolis—that their parents had been long dead—that they were brought up by an uncle, a gentleman of some little property, who dwelt in a remote village in the northern part of England—and that they possessed not, to their knowledge, any relations now upon the face of the earth. These little pieces of information came out during the discourse: but the twins did not mention whence their present resources were derived,—and Lord Octavian did not seek by any insidious dexterity to fathom the matter. He saw that they were all ingenuousness, frankness, and inexperience; and he was fearful of shocking the delicate fibres of their minds by the display of aught savouring of undue curiosity. On rising to take his leave, he requested permission to call occasionally when he might happen to be passing that way. Christina gave no response: but Christian, delighted at what he considered a display of the kindliest and friendliest feeling, cheerfully proclaimed his assent.

Lord Octavian Meredith had not taken his departure many minutes—and the twins were in the midst of self-congratulations that the duel had resulted without injury to either party—when Mrs. Macaulay burst somewhat suddenly into the room, with a visible consternation depicted upon her countenance. The brother and sister both surveyed her in alarm; and she hastened to exclaim, "Have I not heard you say, my dear young gentleman and lady, that Mr. Preston of the Regent's Park is your friend—or guardian—or something of the sort?"

A quick affirmative burst from the lips of the twins; and it was with increased suspense, mingled even with terror, that they surveyed Mrs. Macaulay: for they were smitten with the presentiment that something serious had happened.

"Do tell me," she went on to exclaim,—"has Mr. Preston got much money of yours in his hands?"

"We do not know," was Christian's response. "Indeed, we are utterly uninformed on the subject. But what has occurred?"

"I am really very much afraid it will be a sad blow for you," she said. "Now, don't alarm yourselves—I mean, don't excite yourselves too much—though I dare say it will be exciting enough——"

"But what *has* occurred?" asked Christina, almost goaded to torture with anxiety. "Do not keep us in suspense!"

"Mr. Preston has run away," responded Mrs. Macaulay: "he has committed forgeries to an immense amount—placards are posted up offering a reward for his apprehension—I have just seen one—and as the name struck me, I was fearful it might be *your* Mr. Preston. And it is too!—there is no doubt! Joseph Preston, of Cambridge Terrace?"

Yes—it was the same; and this announcement came like a thunderbolt upon the brother and sister. For upwards of a minute they stood contemplating Mrs. Macaulay in blank dismay: then, as if simultaneously smitten by the same sentiment, which prompted them to seek consolation from each other, they locked themselves in a fond embrace. Mrs. Macaulay's worst fears were confirmed from the effect which her intelligence had produced upon the twins. We have already said that she did not positively possess a bad heart: but her better feelings were almost completely over-ruled by her love of gain and her fear of loss, —so that while on the one hand she really pitied the orphans, yet on the other she was already wondering to herself whether they could possibly think of keeping on their lodgings, and whether the rental of twenty-five shillings a week would be thenceforth safe?

"Don't you think you had better go at once," she suggested, "to Mr. Preston's house? I dare say the police are in possession of it; and you can at all events find out whether he has left behind him any papers regarding yourselves."

Christian and Christina were at once struck by the excellence of this advice, and by the necessity of immediately following it. Mrs. Macaulay slowly retired from the room; and the twins,—having again embraced each other, and whispered words of hope and consolation in each other's ears, —hastened to their respective chambers to dress for going out. In a few minutes they were ready; and they sallied forth together. As they proceeded along, arm-in-arm, towards the Regent's Park, they spoke but little: yet they were constantly turning their handsome dark eyes upon each other, to infuse mutual encouragement by their looks. Each strove to assume an air of as much cheerfulness as possible, for the sake of the other: but both in their hearts entertained deep misgivings lest the crimes of Mr. Preston should prove ruinous to themselves. Many a passenger in the street lingered to gaze upon that interesting pair,—that young damsel with the sylphid form—that youth with the slender graceful shape, both endowed with so high an order of beauty—and their twin condition being at a glance recognisable. But they saw not that they were thus the objects of such interest,—an interest all the deeper, inasmuch as there was trouble but too evident in their countenances, despite all their efforts to conceal it.

We may here pause to observe that the Mr. Preston who has been mentioned, was a man of about fifty—short and slight—of exceeding bustling habits, and with a thorough business-like air. He had possessed a counting-house in the City; and his private residence was one of the mansions on Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park. He had ever been reputed a rich man: but, unlike Mr. Armytage, he had cared little or nothing for brilliant society, and had never courted it. Perhaps if his affairs had long been failing, he might have located himself in the Regent's Park with the hope of sustaining the impression that he was really wealthy, rather than for the purpose of mingling in the fashionable world. He was unmarried and childless; and thus, fortunately, he had no close connexions to be involved in his ruin and disgraced by it.

Christian and Christina reached Cambridge Terrace; and their summons at the front door was answered by a police-constable. From him they learnt that Mr. Preston had committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds, as already ascertained—and that it was suspected there were other cases which were yet to transpire. It was only at an early hour in the morning of this same day that the forgeries were discovered by some gentleman in the financial world: and when the police, on receiving the information, had arrived at Cambridge Terrace to apprehend the culprit, they found that he had absconded during the past night. In addition to those particulars, Christian and Christina learnt that no papers of any consequence at all had been discovered either at the dwelling in Regent's Park, or at the office in the City; but that in Mr. Preston's bedroom at the former, there were traces of a considerable number of documents having been purposely burnt in the grate.

Such were the particulars gleaned from the police-constable; and the twins passed away from the mansion,—slowly and in silence. They walked some distance before they even dared to glance towards each other: they felt that their ruin had been accomplished. At length their looks met: tears filled the eyes of both—and they would have flung themselves into each other's arms, were it not a public place and people were proceeding hither and thither.

"Let us not despond, dearest sister," said Christian, suddenly wiping his eyes. "That which Mr. Preston did not do for me, I must now endeavour to achieve for myself. I will seek for a situation that may enable me to earn at least something; and I will work hard, dear Christina, to keep us both in respectability."

"And I too will work, Christian," replied the sister. "No—we will not despond!—we have the advantage of a good education, and it will be hard indeed if we cannot earn our bread by our industry."

The brother and sister were inspired with courage by the resolve to which they had thus come. The tears no longer stood in their eyes: their hearts were no longer smitten with sadness. They had a fond reliance upon each other: they had faith in heaven;—youth moreover is not the age which is prone to despair; and thus they were even happy. As they proceeded homeward, they discussed the plans which they should immediately pursue. They agreed that it would be no longer prudent to occupy a lodging at twenty-five shillings a week; and they decided on speaking at once to Mrs. Macaulay about giving it up. When they reached Mortimer Street, their landlady, who was somewhat anxiously on the look-out for them, hastened to open the front door, and invited them into her own parlour. They frankly explained their position—expressed their desire to remove as speedily as possible into a cheaper lodging—and with equal candour informed Mrs. Macaulay that they were now entirely dependent on themselves. They possessed a good stock of clothes; and they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in hand—besides a few articles of jewellery of some little value.

"Well, my poor children," said Mrs. Macaulay, "I am sure I am exceedingly sorry for you; and if there is anything in the world I can do to help you, it shall be done. I know a very worthy widow-woman who lives in a small house in Park Street, Camden Town; and I happen to be aware that her lodgings are at this very moment to let. You would get two nice rooms for ten shillings a week; and you may give me as a reference. As for your lodgings here, I won't be hard upon you, considering how you are situated. You have just entered a new week: besides which, I am entitled to another clear week's notice: but we will say nothing about the notice—and therefore if you pay me the week I shall be satisfied. I should however advise you to leave as soon as you can:—not, my dear children, that I want to get rid of you, but because the sooner you begin to economise in every way, the better for yourselves. And so, Miss, you would like to get needlework? Well, and very praiseworthy too! I should recommend you to apply to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier in the City. Any one will tell you where it is; and you are certain to get employment there. But as for you, Master Ashton, I really am at a loss what to suggest. If I hear of anything, I will let you know. And now let me offer you each a glass of wine and a piece of cake: and then you had better go and see Mrs. Giles in Park Street at once."

Mrs. Macaulay was gratefully thanked for all the advice she had tendered; but the proffered refreshments were declined, as the twins were resolved to delay not a moment in carrying out their new plans. They accordingly set off again through the Regent's Park, to Camden Town; and when they were gone, Mrs. Macaulay, who never let the grass grow under her feet, put up in her window a card announcing "Furnished Lodgings to Let." She experienced a slight twinge of conscience at having bargained for the twenty-five shillings for the rent of the current week,—seeing that it was only just entered upon, and that the orphans would most likely move away in the evening or early on the morrow, so that she would have the chance of letting her rooms again at once. But she tranquillised that remorseful feeling by the reflection that she *might* have demanded a clear week's notice—or, in default thereof, an additional sum of twenty-five shillings. And then too, the offer of the cake and wine was another salve for her conscience. It was true that it had been declined: but it was the young people's look-out—the offer had not been the less made—and she was enabled to congratulate herself on her own generosity. So, altogether, Mrs. Macaulay came to the conclusion that she had acted kindly rather than with harshness; and she proceeded to regale herself with the good things which had been refused by the orphans.

In about a couple of hours they returned,—having made arrangements with Mrs. Giles; and they began to pack up their things for the purpose of removing that very same evening.

It was about nine o'clock—their boxes were all in readiness—and a cab was at the door to receive the luggage and bear the orphans away to their new and much humbler home. They flung a last look round the apartments which they were now quitting, to assure themselves that they were leaving nothing of their own behind; and as their eyes met, a sentiment of sadness simultaneously smote them both,—an identity of feeling, to the effect that it seemed as if they were suddenly going down in the world—or at all events that the battle of life was now about to commence. But they embraced each other; and again were they cheered by that profound fondness which inspired mutual trustfulness and reliance; and hand-in-hand they issued forth from the sitting-room. They descended the stairs; and just as they reached the landing of the first floor, the door of the front apartment opened—and Mr. Redcliffe, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat on his head, appeared upon the threshold,—he being about to go forth. His dark eyes were at once riveted upon the brother and sister; and there was something about them which immediately inspired him with a strong interest on their behalf.

"I presume," he said, "that you are my fellow-lodgers, of whom the landlady spoke to me this morning in such pleasing terms?"

Christian answered to the effect that he and his sister had hitherto lodged in the house—but that now they were about to remove elsewhere.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Redcliffe, in a melancholy tone. "I am sorry for that. It would have pleased me to form your acquaintance."

But having thus spoken, he bowed—and hurrying abruptly down the stairs, issued forth from the house. Yet the bow was one of well-bred courtesy, accompanied by a melancholy smile, and with a look plainly showing the interest which even in a few swift brief minutes had been inspired in him by the appearance of the twins.

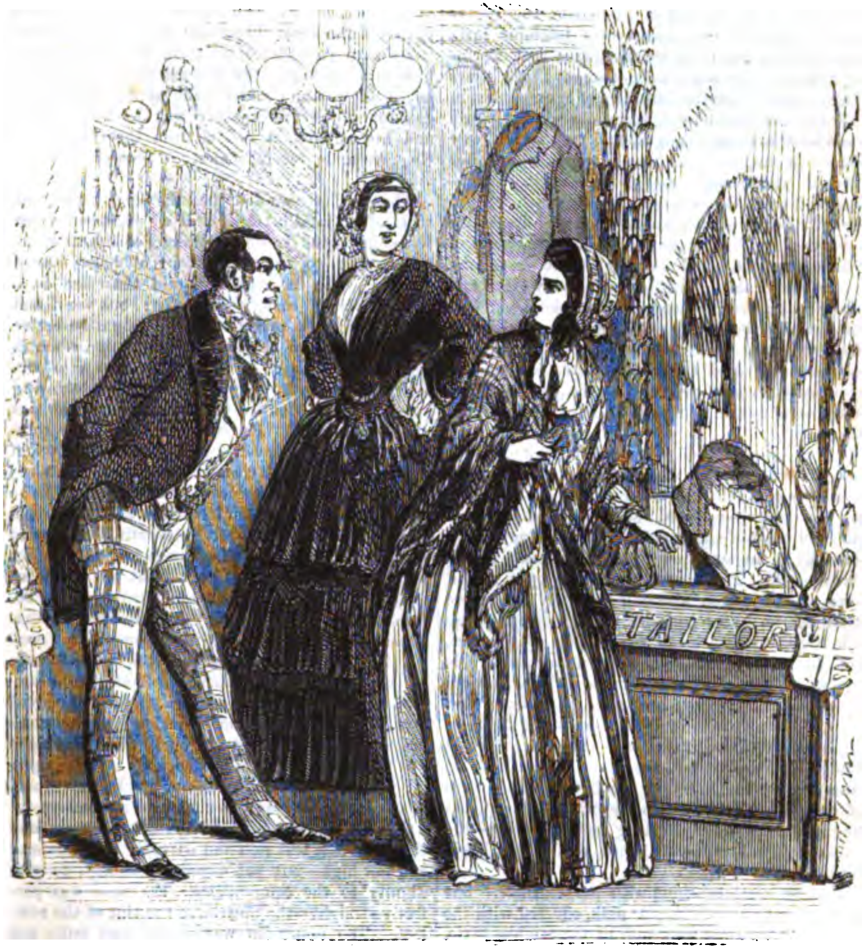
"He is a strange man—a very strange man!" said Mrs. Macaulay, who, standing at the foot of the stairs at the time to bid the orphans good-bye, had overheard what just passed. "He is enormously rich however; and that is a great consolation—for I am not usually fond of eccentric people. And now farewell, my young friends; and whenever you happen to be passing, do just drop in and tell me how you are getting on. But mind and don't forget Mr. Samuel Emanuel, Miss Ashton!"

The orphans took their leave of Mrs. Macaulay—entered the cab—and were driven away towards their new home.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EASTERN LADY.

The scene changes to a small but exceedingly neat villa-residence in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill. It stood considerably apart from the other dwellings that were nearest,—and in the midst of a somewhat spacious garden, which was surrounded by a wall, with the exception of that part which fronted the road, and where there were iron railings. But within these railings the evergreens and shrubs were so thickly grouped, and were so high, as to form as complete a barrier against observation from passers-by as if the wall itself had been continued there. Two iron gates opened upon a semicircular carriage-sweep: the lawn, the gardens, and the gravel-walks were in excellent order. On one side of the house were the stables—on the other side a large conservatory, filled with rare exotics. The windows of the dwelling had all Venetian blinds; and these, especially in the drawing and dining-rooms, were usually kept closed throughout the day as well as the night. The villa was approached by a bye-road leading out of the main one which intersects Notting Hill, and from which the villa itself was



about half a mile distant. So few were the persons who ever passed along that bye-road—unless it were labourers to and from their work—that Shrubbery Villa, as the place was called, was in a comparatively perfect seclusion on that particular outskirt of the multitudinous metropolis. Thus the occupants were sufficiently far removed from the observation of any curious or gossiping neighbours; and for any one courting such seclusion, it was the very place to enjoy it.

We have spoken of it as it might be seen in the daytime: but it is in the evening, when the veil of darkness was upon the earth, that we are about to introduce our readers to a portion of its interior.

An apartment on the first floor, at the back of the drawing-room, and therefore looking on the garden in the rear, was fitted up in the most exquisite style. This style was altogether oriental: for instead of chairs, there was a continuous range of ottomans against the walls, interrupted only by the doorway in one direction and by the casement in another. The Venetian blinds were closed outside that casement: and within, heavy folds of the richest crimson drapery kept out the slightest current of air. A lamp, suspended to the ceiling, shed a soft roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—but neither heated nor sickly. It was just such a warmth as was grateful on an October evening—and such a perfume as was refreshing, for it exhaled from flowers artistically arranged in costly vases. Some of those flowers were of that rare exotic kind which are seldom seen in this country, and then only in the conservatories of wealthy mansions. The mantel-piece was covered with superb ornaments, all of an oriental kind: the central table displayed the most curious as well as the most costly luxuries of eastern art.

"Summons!" echoed Mr. Redcliffe, for a moment drawing himself up haughtily. "Remember, Princess Indora, that you are not now in a country where you can coerce or command. If you behold me here, it is that I have come voluntarily, and in obedience to no power save that of my own will."

"You perhaps have a right to upbraid me," said Indora, in a voice that was tremulous and mournful: "but it would be generous if you were to abstain."

"I will do so," rejoined Redcliffe, speaking more gently, and even as if he regretted the sort of half rebuke which he had just now administered, —"because, if I experienced some evil at the hands of your Royal father and yourself, I likewise received some kindness."

The Princess Indora made a sign for him to sit down. He slowly put off his cloak, and placed himself upon the ottoman—but at such a distance from the lady, that she flung upon him a rapid glance of tender reproach.

We must observe that the conversation which we have just recorded had passed in the same language in which Indora had discoursed with Sagoonah, and that Redcliffe spoke it with proficient ease and fluency.

"Is it possible," he went on to ask, "that your Highness has come to England for the sole purpose described in the letter which I received at my new lodging this afternoon?"

"For what other purpose could I come?" asked the Princess. "Yes—it is true, Clement Redcliffe, that I have followed you to your own native land for the object described in my letter. I speak frankly. Love has made me bold before: it renders me not a coward now;—for I glory in that love which I feel for you. Do you require any additional proof than those words which I addressed to you—those offers which I made to you—and the whole tenour of my conduct towards you, when far away in my native land? You have that proof in the fact that I have undertaken and accomplished this long, long journey—that I have travelled under a feigned name, veiling my princely rank beneath a semblance of mediocrity and obscurity; I have come with but three faithful dependants—and I was resolved never to rest until I discovered you. Accident made me acquainted with the circumstance that you had been living at a particular hotel: this day I learnt that you had returned thither, but that you had removed elsewhere."

Redcliffe had listened with visible pain to this speech, which was delivered with an admixture of mournfulness and enthusiasm,—mournfulness at the coldness of his demeanour when they had met, and exultation at all that she had accomplished for the love that she bore him. And on his side, he was pained because his soul was naturally too generous not to compassionate the woman who had thus formed so extraordinary a passion for him—a passion which he however could not reciprocate; and he knew not in what terms to convey a decision which should dash to the ground all the hopes she had entertained.

"You do not speak to me," she went on to say,—"you are cold and distant. I half feared that it would be so: yet I endeavoured to persuade myself to the contrary. I reasoned that you could not fail to be touched by these last proofs of love which I have given you—and that a feeling of sympathy might possibly beget a softer and deeper sentiment."

"Indora," responded Redcliffe, in the mildest tones of his rich sonorous voice, "this is an infatuation which is truly incomprehensible. I have no vanity that can possibly be flattered," he added with some degree of bitterness; "and therefore I deceive not myself when I look in the mirror: nor would the adulation of the veriest sycophant—if I were a King, like your father, to-morrow—have power to deceive me. I know what I am—a man prematurely old—my hair turning gray—baldness coming—my complexion sallowed by illness and bronzed by the torrid sun of your native clime——"

"Speak not thus!" interrupted Indora, gazing upon Redcliffe with a look of genuine and ineffable tenderness. "Even if you be as you describe yourself, you are not so in my eyes. Were your hair white—were your face wrinkled—were your form bowed with age—I should still love you as fondly and as well! Yes—I should still behold you only as you were when first I saw you long years back, in my girlhood—and therefore should I love you! Nor is it only that the image of your personal beauty of that time is so indelibly impressed upon my heart: it is that the brilliancy of your intellect filled me with admiration—your manners charmed me—your knowledge enlightened me!"

She ceased for a moment; and then, with a sudden transition from one language to another, she went on to speak—but now in the English tongue, and with a fluency, an eloquence, a precision of accent, and a correctness of idiom that were truly remarkable.

"For all these reasons, Clement Redcliffe, do I love you! My happiness now depends upon the next word which must fall from your lips. Ponder well ere you speak that word, if it be to cause the wreck of a fellow-creature's happiness! Ah! there was another reason which made me love you; and if I forgot to mention it ere now, it notwithstanding is far from being the least! It is that you taught me the sublime doctrines of your own religion—that you weaned me from paganism and raised me up to be a Christian. You eradicated from my mind all the detestable prejudices with which it had been embued: you reclaimed me from a condition of mental darkness—you guided me into the paths of light. And think you that the gratitude wherewith you inspired me, was not certain to expand and deepen into love? Yes: and more—you taught me your own native language—that language in which I am now addressing you!"

"Princess," responded Redcliffe, now also speaking in the English language, "it cuts me to the very soul to hear all these things flow from your lips: for I am not naturally stern, cruel, and pitiless—and yet there is a word that *must* be spoken, but to which I tremble to give utterance!"

"No, no—breathe it not!" ejaculated Indora, with a sudden start and with dilating eyes: "breathe it not, I entreat you! it would be my death-blow! Think on all that I have done for your sake,—my native land abandoned—a strange and far-off clime willingly and gladly sought!—think of all this, I say—and give me some hope, some encouragement, I beseech and implore you!"

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now summoning all his fortitude to his aid, and endeavouring to crush the more generous feelings of his nature beneath the iron heel of his own strong will,—"it is for your own sake that I must speak promptly and decisively. I would not insult you—I would not wound you, by returning a written response to your own letter: I therefore resolved to come personally, though foreseeing that the interview would be a painful one. Now, arm yourself with all that courage which is naturally your own—call to your aid all that strength of mind with which Providence has endowed you. In loving me, you have fixed your affections on one who cannot love you in return:—would you have me, then, proclaim the contrary? It would be a falsehood!"

"If you love me not," answered Indora, sadly and softly,—"and you have often, too often told me this much before,—at least you may have compassion upon me. My own love might inspire you with sympathy; and sympathy is a tender feeling, akin to love itself!"

"Indora, the truth must indeed be spoken, stern though it may be—pitiless though it may appear. I cannot—I dare not marry you! And now, I beseech and implore that you will summon all Christian fortitude and resignation to your aid!"

The superb head of the Indian Princess drooped slowly down upon her bosom; and her arms, with the hands clasped, drooped likewise languidly over her magnificent dress. It seemed as if she had sunk into despair, and that all sense of the possibility of earthly happiness had left her. Redcliffe was evidently moved:—from the very bottom of his soul he pitied her; and whatsoever sense remained in his memory of that past evil sustained at her hands, and to which he had alluded—it all died away within him. He was too magnanimous at that moment to entertain any other feeling than one of profound compassion. He lingered: he thought that he was bound to say something more—something soul-strengthening if not hopefully cheering—something mentally fortifying, if not tenderly encouraging. But all in an instant smitten with the conviction that the scene ought to end as speedily as possible, he abruptly threw on his cloak; and exclaiming, "Farewell, Indora! may you be happy yet!" was hastening to leave the room.

"No!—one word ere we part!" cried the Princess, springing towards him: and her exquisitely shaped hand grasped his arm. "One word, Clement Redcliffe!—for we cannot separate thus."

"What would you say?" asked Redcliffe, with averted looks, and with visible impatience to take his departure.

"Only this!" she responded:—"that you will give yet one week's grave and serious reflection to that subject whereon you have ere now pronounced a decision. For one week let that decision be recalled. It is only a delay of seven poor days which I ask——"

"And which can effect no change, Princess, in my sentiments," added Redcliffe, mournfully but firmly.

"Interrupt me not!" ejaculated Indora, almost with vehemence: "but listen to what I have to say! One week's grace I demand at your hands. Pledge yourself that on the eighth evening hence you will return to me at the same hour, and that you will *then* pronounce your decision. Whatever it be, I will respect it."

"You promise to respect it?" exclaimed Redcliffe, now turning his eyes inquiringly upon Indora's countenance.

"I will respect it," she answered: and at the same moment her long taper fingers were withdrawn from the grasp which had tightened upon his arm—so that he was now free to depart, without violently disengaging himself from her hand.

"Then I will come!" he said: and the next instant the door of the room closed behind him.

He traversed the landing, which was filled with costly vases exhaling perfumes: he sped down the richly carpeted staircase: he reached the hall, where the ayah Sagoonah was waiting to afford him egress. He snatched up his hat from the hall-table; and as he turned towards the door, his looks suddenly encountered those of the Hindoo woman. For an instant he was struck with a strange unknown sensation—mysterious amazement blending with a sort of vague terror—as he caught the wondrous brilliancy of those regards which flashed upon him for an instant, and the next were withdrawn. He knew Sagoonah well—had known her indeed for years in her own native clime: but never did he recollect that she had looked at him in that way before.

He said not a word—but hastened forth from the house; and as he proceeded along the bye-road, there was a certain trouble in his mind while thinking of those burning looks which had been flung upon him like a spell, and which now appeared to haunt him. He quickened his pace, as if to outstrip the various painful and conflicting thoughts which were agitating in his brain: he reached the main road—he proceeded onward in the direction of the metropolis. He soon came within the sphere of brilliant gas-lamps: but brighter than all—and ominous too—was the impression left upon his soul by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. SAMUEL EMANUEL.

In one of the principal streets of that perfect maze or network of thoroughfares, so narrow and so crowded, which constitute the City of London, stood the immense establishment of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier.

The reader will not require to be informed that this individual was of the Hebrew race: nor, if we be compelled to say anything to his disparagement, must it be presumed that we are holding him up as an invariable type of his nation. It is nothing of the sort. We yield to no one, we may without vanity affirm, in enlightened opinions with respect to the Jews; and we have the conviction that there are many excellent persons amongst them, as well as many admirable traits in their national character. But there are good and bad of all kinds and species in this world,—good and bad Christians—good and bad Mussulmans—good and bad Buddhists—and therefore why not bad Israelites as well as good ones? We will even go farther—and we will affirm that within the range of our own experience, we have met persons professing Christianity of a viler stamp of rascality, and capable of more unmitigated scoundrelism, than ever we discovered a Jew to be guilty of.

Mr. Samuel Emanuel was the proprietor, as we have said, of an immense clothing mart. He had spent thousands and thousands of pounds in advertising it, and had puffed himself up into an amazing notoriety. Not a wooden hoarding about London that was not covered with his placards. If you took your seat in an omnibus, a shower of little books, neatly stitched, would suddenly rain in upon you: and on picking one up, you immediately recognised the superb frontage of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment in the form of a wood-cut upon the cover. If you went for a walk in the fields in the environs of London, your eye would catch the name, calling, and address of Mr. Samuel Emanuel upon every fence and on every dead wall. If you looked in the advertising columns of newspapers, your eye would suddenly rest on a string of ill-measured lines, by courtesy called "poetry;" and if you had the curiosity or patience to read the wretched doggrel, you would thence evolve a series of the most extravagant puffs of Mr. Samuel Emanuel's establishment. There could be no doubt in your mind that while Mr. Samuel Emanuel considered the Sovereign to be the first personage in the realm, he entertained the pleasing conviction that he himself was the second. Talk of your first-rate authors—your eminent artists, or your great sculptors—talk of your renowned warriors by sea or by land—what was any one of these in comparison with the far-famed Mr. Samuel Emanuel?

And yet, if you walked into his establishment and beheld this great personage, you would find him to be as unprepossessing a fellow as you could possibly meet in a day's walk. Scarcely of the middle height—ill made and ungainly—he sought to set himself off by all the accessories of his own tailoring craft. No trouser-pattern in his own window would be more outrageous than the one selected for his pantaloons. He would wear a dress-coat, with rich velvet collar and lappels, as early as eight o'clock in the morning; and his waistcoat would be of the gaudiest silk pattern. As for his neckerchief, it would be sure to correspond in its flaunting vulgarity with the rest of his attire, and would be fastened in front with some inconceivably outrageous breast-pin—perhaps an enormous carbuncle clutched in a golden fist. Festooning over his gaudy waistcoat, there would be three or four watch-chains of different fashions and degrees of massiveness; and his dirty, stumpy, ill-shaped fingers, with very horrible nails, would be decorated with enough rings to fill a small tray, such as those whose contents purchasers are invited to inspect in jewellers' shops. As for his countenance, it had all the prominency of profile characteristic of his race,—but with an expression of mingled hardness and meanness, of low paltry cunning and avaricious greed—together with a faculty for the sudden assumption of a coarse vulgar insolence, that might readily be supposed to characterise such an individual.

His wife was a perfect giantess, with large coarse features—an enormously stout shape—and an air of brazen effrontery which she seldom took the trouble to subdue. There was a certain showiness about her—a sort of Flemish mare kind of handsomeness, which to some little extent was striking; and Mr. Emanuel considered her one of the finest specimens of the female sex. For this uxoriousness he was rather to be honoured than otherwise; and therefore we record it as no imputation to his detriment.

In respect to the establishment itself, we need only observe that it was splendidly fitted up—that the shop-windows were of the largest sized plate-glass—that the lamps were almost endlessly multiplied—and that as the show-rooms were crammed with goods, so the various shopmen were well nigh countless in each particular department. But truth compels us to add that the garments which Mr. Samuel Emanuel had for sale, were very much like himself—dashing and fine, but intrinsically mean and trumpery. Indeed, the cheapest of his articles would prove the dearest bargain that a purchaser could possibly possess himself of: they were very much after the same description as Peter Pindar's razors, which were made to sell, and not to cut: for Mr. Emanuel's garments were made for disposal, and not for wear.

To this establishment was it that, at about eleven in the forenoon of the day after the twins' removal to their new lodging, Christina bent her way, in company with her brother. He however remained outside while she entered: but just within the door she stopped short, under the influence of a sudden timidity which seized upon her. At the same moment she heard voices speaking: but those who were thus engaged in conversation, were concealed from her view, as she was hidden from their's, by an array of gaudy dressing-gowns for gentlemen, hung upon frames so contrived as to show off the particular fit and appearance of the several garments. Christina could not for the life of her move another step forward at the instant: she was overwhelmed with bashfulness—there was a sickening sensation at her heart—for she felt as if she were there under almost mendicant circumstances. It was no wonder that the delicate sensibilities of the young girl were thus poignantly touched by the new position to which Mr. Preston's flight had reduced her; and tears starting into her eyes, she was compelled to linger where she was in order to control and tranquillise her feelings. She thus unavoidably became a listener to some portion of the discourse which was going on behind the array of dressing-gowns.

"Well, Mr. Solomons," said a coarse masculine voice, speaking with the half patronizing, half stern accents of authority, "so far so good. But we must think of at least a hundred other means of keeping the Emporium incessantly before the public. Ah! by the bye, have you seen about some ragged boy or wretched-looking woman, to fling a stone at the pane which got accidentally cracked yesterday?"

"Yes, sir—it is all right," answered Mr. Solomons, who, we may as well at once inform our readers, was Mr. Emanuel's principal and confidential clerk. "I succeeded yesterday in getting hold of the most pitiable object that ever was seen in female shape; and she will be in the street presently to bang a large brick-bat right against the glass."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Mr. Samuel Emanuel, chuckling with a coarse laugh. "The pane, you see, my dear, was cracked; and therefore we should be obliged to have a new one—so that we really lose nothing by getting it smashed completely for us."

"Oh! I understand, you cunning rogue!" cried Mrs. Emanuel, in a great rough voice, as if it were a grenadier speaking. "But what will follow?——though I can pretty well guess."

"Please, ma'am," said Mr. Solomons, "I have arranged it all. The woman agrees to break the pane; and of course she is equally agreeable to be given into custody. She will go before the Lord Mayor, and whine out a piteous tale about distress having compelled her to do it, that she might get herself sent to prison, as she has such a dreadful horror of the workhouse."

"And then, you know, my dear," resumed Mr. Emanuel, taking up the thread of the explanations, "as I shall have to attend at the Mansion House to charge the woman, I shall of course appear to be very much affected at her tale: I shall express my regret that I gave her in charge—and I shall beg his lordship to let her off with a reprimand. The Lord Mayor of course will look grave and pompous, and will deliver himself of the usual tirade—to the effect that persons can't be allowed to go smashing the windows of highly respectable tradesmen in the City of London; and he will send her to prison for seven days. So then I shall beg leave to hand to his lordship a couple of guineas for the poor woman's use when she comes out of gaol; and I shall tell her that if she can do needlework, she is to call upon me, when I will give her plenty of employment at good wages."

"To be sure, sir!—that is the way to do it," said the obsequious Mr. Solomons. "But, beg pardon, sir—if you *could* possibly manage to squeeze out a tear——"

"I'll shed a dozen," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel. "And then, don't you see, my dear," he continued, again addressing his wife, "we shall have such a long report in all to-morrow's papers—and so nicely drawn up! Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the celebrated clothier—pane of plate glass smashed—value thirty pounds—Mr. Emanuel deeply affected—behaved most handsomely—two guineas, and promise of work—hum of applause in the court, which the usher did not attempt to repress—Lord Mayor himself much affected—not an unmoistened eye in the whole place. There, my dear! what do you think of that? Famous advertisement—and costs us nothing but the two guineas to the woman, and the five shillings I ordered Solomons to give as earnest-money when he made the arrangement."

"I took care to give it to her, sir," observed that confidential personage: "and I have no doubt the poor afflicted creature," he added with a low ironical chuckle, "got amazingly drunk last night. But I have done more than this, sir: your orders about the boy who is to be run over by your advertising-van, are likewise carried out."

"Excellent!" again cried the harsh voice of Mr. Emanuel. "Tell us all about it, Mr. Solomons."

"Well, sir, I made an arrangement with the boy's father, and agreed on the price for which his son's leg is to be broken,—a guinea down on the nail—five guineas after it is done—and the doctor's bill to be paid. He's a nice lad, about fourteen—very sharp—and soon understood the advantage of being run over, sir, by your advertising-van."

"Of course," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel: "but the great advantage, though, will be reaped by us, I think. Another good puff, my dear, for the Emporium—and better than all the advertisements in the world. Let me see? Shocking accident—poor boy run over by one of the numerous advertising-vans of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the eminent clothier—Mr. Emanuel behaved in the handsomest manner—relieved the poor father's feelings to the utmost of his power—and has undertaken to provide for the boy for the rest of his life—noble trait, that, in the character of Mr. Samuel Emanuel, the great clothier, outfitter for the colonies, army and navy tailor, &c. &c."

"Yes, sir—these are the best ways of keeping yourself properly before the public," said Mr. Solomons.

"But what letter is it that you have got in your hand there," inquired the clothier's wife, "and which you were reading just now?"

"Oh, it's nothing, ma'am!" replied Solomons. "Only a long rigmarole from that Mary Wright, you know——"

"Ah! the girl who worked so well, but who was in a consumption?" interjected Mrs. Emanuel. "And pray what does she want?"

"It's the old tale, ma'am," answered Solomons. "She declares she has worked herself to death in your service—she is now on her death-bed, without the necessaries of life—and begs and implores that you will——I think she says, *for the love of God*—send her a few shillings. She gives her address and courts inquiry into her case——Here it is! No. —, Redcross Street."

"Ah! capital tale, no doubt," exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, with flippant coarseness: "but not a single penny will she get from us. Take no notice of the letter, Solomons."

"That is just the course, sir, I intended to adopt. Ah! by the bye, sir, I had nearly forgotten to mention that several of the slop-workers threaten to strike for an advance of wages. The women say they can't go on making shirts at three-halfpence a piece, finding their own needles and thread."

"What impudence!" vociferated Mr. Emanuel; "let them strike and be hanged! There are plenty of others to take their place. Thank God, there are thousands and thousands of poor devils of that class ever ready to come forward and fill up gaps. Ah! it's a blessed country to live in, where the laws keep the labour-markets flooded with these pauperised wretches who are glad to work for any pittance. Deuce a bit! no rise in wages! Let them stick to their three-halfpence a shirt or go about their business. Ah! when I think of it—Solomons, write out a cheque for Malachi Lewis, for those six cases of champagne that came in yesterday."

"Yes, sir. There is one thing more that I have to mention. It's about Sarah Jones——"

"What! that pestering widow-woman," interjected Mrs. Emanuel, "who always will come to the place with her three children, because she says she has no one in whose charge she can leave them: and though they are certainly kept tidy enough——"

"It's the same woman, ma'am," responded Solomons. "She came here just now to confess that she had pawned those two shooting-jackets she had to make up. She says that distress compelled her to do it, and that her landlady was going to turn her children and herself out into the streets at eleven o'clock at night when it was pouring with rain."

"And she has pawned my shooting-jackets!" vociferated Mr. Emanuel, in a towering rage. "Let her be given into custody at once, Solomons! And you must appear for me before the magistrate. Of course you will say that I feel it to be a duty which I owe to society—that I do it on public grounds alone—and all that sort of thing. And now go and see about it without delay."

This conversation occupied in the delivery far less time than we have taken to record it. Christina had triumphed over her own peculiar sensibilities so far as they regarded herself—but only to have them most keenly awakened in respect to others. She had remained riveted to the spot by the discourse which she thus overheard: its transitions from one subject to another, had been successively fraught with a strange and fearful interest for the generous-hearted girl. The wretched woman whose misery and unscrupulousness were alike taken advantage of to procure the breaking of an already broken window, in order that the clothier might be paraded before the public—that poor boy whose very father had bargained in cold blood for him to sustain a serious injury—the dying girl who in working for the Emanuels, had worked her own winding-sheet, and now vainly implored a pittance of relief—the unfortunate female slop-workers who were ground down to the very lowest infinitesimal fraction of wage, and who were to be remorselessly deprived of employment because they asked for a recompense at least a trifle above starvation-point—and last of all, the hapless widow-woman who was to be given into custody and torn from the children, whom she evidently loved, for an offence to which real penury had driven her, but for which the clothier experienced no sympathy because the case presented not any features which he could turn into an available mode of puffery for himself and his Emporium,—all these cases, coming thickly one upon the other, had filled the heart of Christina with mingled horror, astonishment, pity, and disgust. Therefore, even when her own peculiar feelings were overruled, she was kept riveted to the spot, a most painfully interested listener to a discourse which revealed the wrongs and sufferings of others.

She now stepped forward, and was immediately confronted by Mr. and Mrs. Emanuel, who were turning away from the spot where they had been discoursing with their managing man. Though Christina was neatly dressed, and had not the slightest appearance of poverty about her,—yet the clothier and his wife were so accustomed to receive applications for work from respectable young women in reduced circumstances, that they at once anticipated the object of her visit. The next moment, however, they thought they must be wrong: for a second glance at Christina's countenance showed that there was a flush of indignation upon it, mingled with as much abhorrence as it was in her delicate nature to display. They therefore awaited until she should explain her own business.

"I should be obliged to you," she said, "if you will give me the address of that poor widow-woman of whom you have spoken; and I will at once hasten and furnish her with the means to set herself right towards you—so that you need not give her into custody."

The Jew and Jewess exchanged looks of rapid meaning with each other; and then the former, with an insolent air, exclaimed, "I suppose, young Miss, you have been listening to what passed?"

"And pray," demanded Mrs. Emanuel, "what business have you to come sneaking into a place to play the eavesdropper?"

Christina's countenance became crimson: the flush of indignation previously upon it, suddenly deepened into one of shame, as she was struck by her own imprudence in thus confessing that she had listened: but the avowal was inadvertently made in the strong excitement of feelings under which she was labouring at the moment.

"I will tell you frankly," she said, speedily recovering her presence of mind, "that I called for a specific purpose—and it was scarcely my fault that I overheard any portion of your discourse."

"And that specific purpose?" exclaimed Mr. Emanuel, bending his looks with insolent menace upon the young girl.

"I came to ask for work," she responded, her eyes sinking beneath the coarse regards of the clothier.

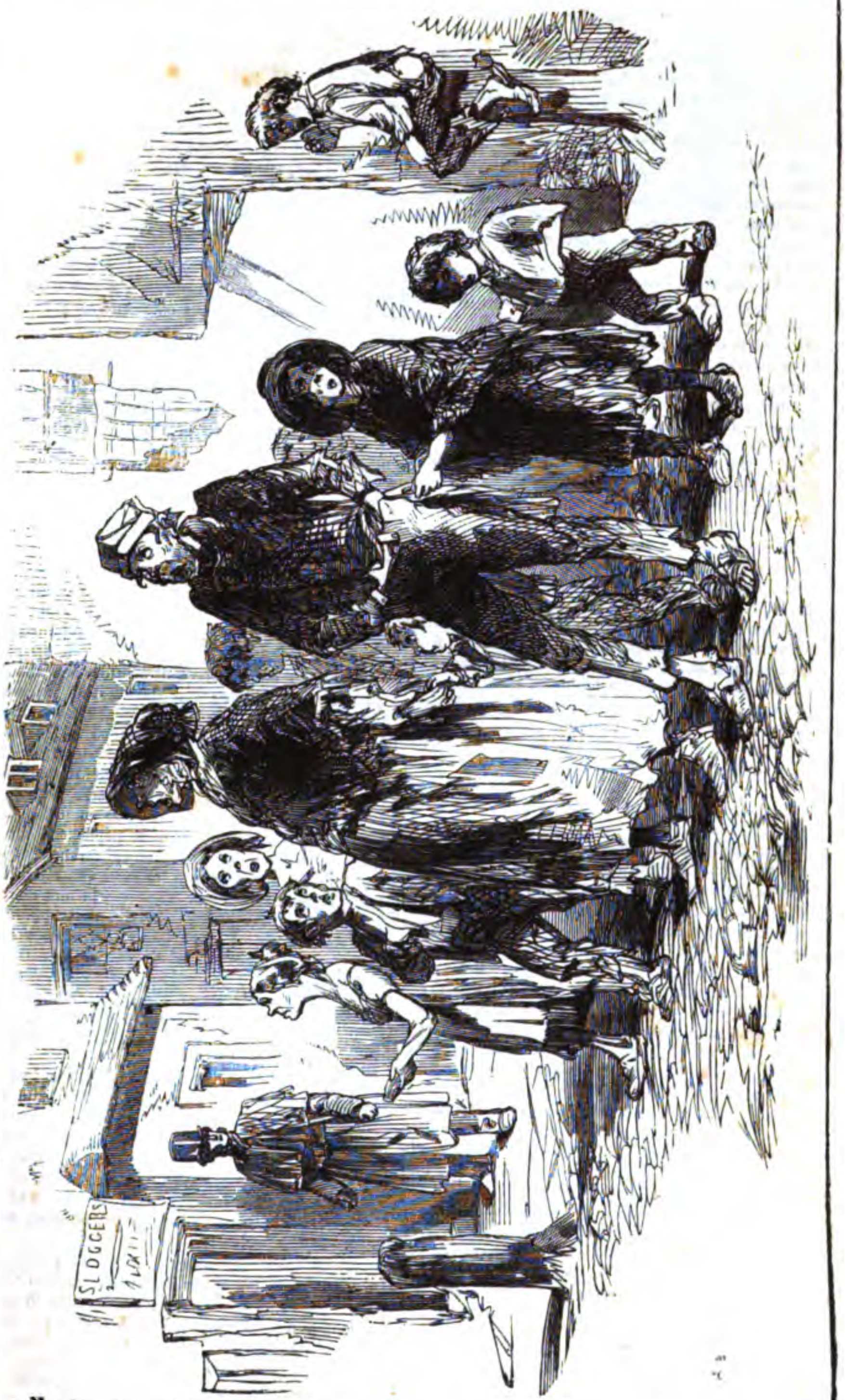
"Work indeed!" he ejaculated, with a sneering air and contemptuous chuckle: then leaning forward towards her, he added with brutal insolence, "You sha'n't have any work from my establishment. I don't encourage sneaking, prying listeners."

"Work indeed!" shouted Mrs. Emanuel, in her great masculine voice; and putting her hands upon her hips, she said, "A pretty creature you are, to come gliding like a cat into a respectable house, just for all the world as if you meant to steal something. Who knows but that you have whipped up an article and have got it under your shawl?"

Christina's eyes for a moment threw a glance of indignant innocence at the coarse Jewess: but the next moment she burst into tears, and staggered back as if about to faint.

"Come—be off with you!" said Mr. Emanuel in the most brutal tone. "You are after no good here; and if you don't make yourself scarce, I shall precious soon send for a policeman."

Terrified by this threat, which she felt the cowardly ruffian was but too capable of carrying out, Miss Ashton issued forth from the shop; and on emerging into the street, was instantaneously joined by her brother. Perceiving that she was in tears, and that she was much agitated, he naturally ascribed her emotions to disappointment in respect to that hope of obtaining work with which they had been flattering themselves: but when he came to learn everything that had passed, his indignation knew no bounds—his naturally fine spirit flamed up in a moment—and Christina experienced some difficulty in preventing him from going back to the Emporium, to overwhelm the


SLOGGERS

Jew and Jewess with reproaches for their brutal conduct towards his sister.

"It is useless, my dear Christian," she said, retaining him forcibly by the arm as they proceeded along the crowded street: "you would only get yourself into some embarrassment. I implore you to tranquillise your feelings! Alas, I begin to comprehend that the power of money is immense and irresistible in this country. It constitutes colossal strength—while poverty is in itself abject weakness. Christian," said the young girl, after a pause, "is there nothing which suggests itself to your mind?"

"Yes, dear Christina," he at once responded, as if the very look which his beautiful twin-sister had bent upon him, transfused in an instant to his mind what was passing in her own. "We must go and relieve the dire necessities of that poor perishing creature. It is fortunate that you heard her address mentioned. Would that we also knew where to find the poor widow, that we might succour her likewise! Alas, our own resources are now limited enough: but still—but still," added Christian, with a world of sincere feeling in his looks and his accents, "we must spare something for the assistance of our fellow-creatures."

The twins were suddenly cheered by the prospect of doing good, as well as by having the means to accomplish it, small though their succour might be. They inquired their way to Redcross Street; and finding the house which Christina had heard mentioned at the Emporium, they ascertained from an old, harsh-featured, sordid-looking woman, who announced herself as the landlady, that there was a young person of the name of Mary Wright lodging at the place, but that as she could not pay her rent, and was dying, the workhouse authorities had been applied to that very day.

"Let me see her," said Christina: while Christian hastily whispered to his sister that he would await her in the street.

The landlady—thinking by the appearance of the twins that they came for a charitable purpose, and that the arrears of rent due to her would probably be paid—suddenly grew mighty civil; and she conducted Christina up a dark and dirty staircase to the very top of the house. Opening an attic door, she gave the young girl to understand that this was Mary Wright's room.

Christina entered. The attic was of the smallest size, and its appearance of the meanest poverty. Stretched upon a wretched flock mattress, which lay upon the boards in one corner—and covered with the scantiest bed-clothing, lay a young woman whose years could scarcely yet have numbered one-and-twenty—in the very last stage of consumption. She was pale as a corpse, save and except with regard to a vivid hectic spot which seemed to burn upon either cheek. She was thin—Oh! so thin—it was complete emaciation!—so that it appeared as if merely to raise that wasted, attenuated form, would be to inflict excruciating pain, as the very bones might threaten to penetrate through the skin—for flesh upon them there was none. The attic was almost completely denuded of every necessary, and possessed not a single comfort. The dying creature was alone when Christina entered,—no relative, no nurse, no friendly female to attend upon her! Notwithstanding her frightfully emaciation—notwithstanding the ravages which disease had worked upon her countenance—there were nevertheless sufficient traces of past beauty to indicate that she must have at one time possessed no ordinary degree of loveliness.

Christina gave her to understand that accident had made her acquainted with her condition—and that though her own means were limited (the generous girl said not *how* limited) she had come to proffer what little assistance she was enabled to afford. Mary Wright was for some time so suffocated by her emotions that she could not give utterance to a word—and the tears streamed from her eyes. At length she succeeded in expressing her deep gratitude, in a weak dying voice and in broken accents,—declaring that she had never expected to behold a friendly countenance gaze upon her again in this life.

Christina learnt from her that about thirty shillings were owing to the landlady; and though the dying young woman proffered not the request in words, yet her plaintively appealing looks seemed to implore our heroine to save her from the threatened removal to the workhouse. This pledge Christina at once gave; and promising likewise to return in a few minutes, she hastened from the room.

The landlady was waiting upon the stairs, watching for Miss Ashton, in order to see what might turn up to her own advantage;—and Christina at once liquidated from her slender purse the arrears of rent that were due. Then she continued her way down stairs, and rejoined her brother in the street.

Christian had been waiting for her about a quarter of an hour; and during this interval a little incident had occurred which he had noticed, and which he presently mentioned to Christina. While walking to and fro in the street, he had beheld a posse of ragged-looking creatures emerge from a narrow dirty court. These individuals consisted of a man dressed like a dilapidated journeyman-carpenter, with a paper cap on his head—a woman having the appearance of the wife of an impoverished artisan—and a whole tribe of children whose rags and tatters scarcely covered their nakedness. At the first apparition of this wretched-looking party, Christian's hand was thrust into his pocket to clutch the first coin which his fingers might happen to encounter, in order to transfer it to the poor family—when something which occurred at the moment, made him drop the coin again in a sort of stupified amazement.

"Now, Bet," said the man, "mind you look like an honest woman for once in your life—and turn that gin-drinking air of your's into a precious dolefulness. And you brats, you!—if you don't put on as much misery as possible, I sha'n't get enough to pay your parents for the hiring of you. Mind, Bet, the dodge is that we walked all the way from Liverpool and can't get no work whatsomever."

These were the words which had produced a sudden revulsion of feeling on the part of Christian, and had so suddenly made him drop the coin again to the bottom of his pocket. He at once saw that it was a gang of unprincipled impostors whom he had been about to relieve. They did not immediately catch sight of him, when they were issuing from the court—nor did they suspect that he overheard the injunctions given by the man: for no sooner was he perceived by them, than he was surrounded by the ragged horde of children, imploring alms in a whining tone, while their dirty little paws were stretched out towards him. At the same instant the man began to snivel forth a miserable tale, of how he was a carpenter out of work—how he and his dear wife and eight children, four of whom were small ones, had tramped all the way from Liverpool, never once sleeping in a bed and enduring every possible privation. Then the woman took up the strain, in a canting, whining, lugubrious tone, telling Christian how she had been brought up by kind parents—how she had been a good wife and a fond mother—how she had borne her husband thirteen children, of which five lay under the turf—and then she stopped short and appeared to cry bitterly. Christian had found himself so completely hemmed in by the posse of impostors, that he had some difficulty in getting from their midst; and in his indignation at being thus regarded as an object on whom to practise their deception, he let drop a few words to make them aware of what he had caught from the man's own lips. Then the posse—from the man himself down to the youngest child—levelled at him the coarsest, filthiest abuse: and as he retreated in one direction, they took another, bending their way into a neighbouring street.

Such was the narrative which Christian gave Christina, when the latter had described to him the spectacle that had met her own eyes in the wretched attic she had been visiting. They proceeded to the nearest pastry-cook's, where they purchased some jelly: they bought some articles at a grocer's—and they ordered bread from a baker's. Then they returned into Redcross Street; and while Christian again waited for his sister, the latter ascended to Mary Wright's chamber. She now learnt a piteous tale from the poor dying creature's lips,—a tale of an early orphanage and of total friendlessness—of dependence upon her own resources—of bitter poverty resignedly endured, and in defiance of all the temptations which her beauty had brought in her way—of the insidious advance of consumption—and of poignant miseries and privations suffered when she was no longer enabled to work.

"Yesterday," said the poor creature in conclusion, "I exerted sufficient energy to write to those who had employed me, imploring assistance. It was in the direst despair that I thus addressed them, and with no real hope in my heart: for, alas! I know full well the hardness of their own hearts. They have not been moved towards me: but heaven has sent me a ministering angel in the form of yourself."

Christina did not choose to sadden the poor dying creature more deeply than she was already afflicted, by explaining that it had come to her knowledge that her appeal to the Emanuels was treated with brutal heartlessness. She remained upwards of an hour with Mary Wright,—doing all she could to conduce to her comfort, and forcing her to partake of the food which was purchased for her use. She promised to return on the following day, and received the warmest, most heartfelt expressions of gratitude from the sufferer's lips. Ere quitting the house, she sought another interview with the landlady; and putting some money into her hand, bade her show all possible attentions to the dying woman,—at the same time giving her the assurance that she should be rewarded in proportion as she obeyed these injunctions.

Christian was not wearied of waiting upwards of an hour for his sister's re-appearance: he knew that she was engaged in a self-imposed task of true benevolence—and he would have cheerfully tarried ten times as long if it were necessary. Scarcely had Christina issued forth from the house, and just as she was taking her brother's arm, they both beheld a gentleman stop short and gaze upon them with an air of interest. He had evidently recognised them, and they too recognised him—for he was none other than Mr. Redcliffe. He at once perceived that there was sadness in Christina's looks, and that tears hung upon her long dark lashes—the traces of that deep sorrow which she had experienced at the mournful narrative of Mary Wright.

"Wherefore are you thus depressed?" he inquired, somewhat abruptly, but with a courteous bow of recognition, as he glanced from one to the other.

"Because I have just left a scene which would move the hardest of hearts," replied Christina. "A young woman, crushed down by overwhelming toil—in the last stage of consumption——"

"And it is a deserving case?" asked Mr. Redcliffe, interrupting the young girl, while he still continued to contemplate both herself and her brother with a deep and mournful interest.

"Oh! yes, sir—it is a deserving case—there can be no doubt of it!" exclaimed Christina, the tears gushing afresh from her eyes, as all she had seen and all she had heard sprang vividly up to her memory.

"Then it shall be inquired into," answered Redcliffe: and with another courteous bow, he passed abruptly on his way.

The twins proceeded slowly along the street, and presently they looked back to see if Mr. Redcliffe had turned to call at the house: but he was just disappearing round the corner of another street, and the orphans knew not what to think—whether he had only said the case should be inquired into in order to cut short a tale which he cared not to hear—or whether the promise would be really fulfilled. As they continued their own way, Christina told her brother all that she had learnt from Mary Wright; and it was with a profound sympathy that the youth listened to his sister's narrative.

They had threaded several streets in their progress towards a point at which they purposed to take an omnibus,—when Christian suddenly pressed his sister's arm; and as she looked in the same direction on which his regards were fixed, she at once comprehended his meaning. There was the posse of ragged impostors, singing at the very top of their voices. The man had his hands thrust into the pockets of his dilapidated trousers; and his face was screwed up to as piteous an air of misery as could be well conceived. The woman, with mouth wide open, was gazing up into the air,—dragging along a ragged urchin by each hand. A girl clung to the coat-tails of the man, who passed as her father;—and to her dress a little half-naked boy, scarcely five years of age, was holding on. On the right of the front rank, an impudent-looking minx of a girl, with an old cotton handkerchief about her head, was staring up at a window and proffering a box of matches. In the rear an older girl and a boy—both with villanously hang-dog countenances—were likewise doing their best to excite compassion. It needed but a partially scrutinising glance to perceive that this tribe of children could, with scarcely any degree of possibility, belong to those who were passing themselves off as their parents: for not between any two of them was there the slightest family similitude.

There they were, slowly making their way along the street,—singing at the top of their discordant voices; and when the song temporarily ceased, the man whined forth the same tale he had already told to Christian—with this trifling difference however, that he happened to substitute Portsmouth for Liverpool as the place whence he and his family had tramped up. Halfpence from the windows rattled down into the street: these were quickly snatched up by the children, who scudded about in all directions for the purpose. the man prayed "that the Lord might bless the kind ladies and gentlemen who thus assisted a poor mechanic out of employ"—the woman dropped divers low curtseys—and then the singing recommenced. It did not seem to strike the charitable donors as being at all strange that the poor family, though a few minutes before they had proclaimed themselves to be starving, did not at once rush off to the nearest baker's and buy some bread. No such thing!—they went on singing away in most frightful discord—until the sudden appearance of a policeman, who was advancing in a manner which plainly showed that he knew the arch-impostors full well, spread dismay in their ranks.

The singing ceased in a moment: and the man hurriedly said, "Come along, Bet—or that blue-bottle will precious soon blow the gaff!"—and they made a rush towards the next street, dragging the youngest children hastily along with them.

Such was the spectacle which the twins beheld; and it certainly afforded no encouraging picture of London life. It shocked the pure minds of that youthful pair to think that such impostures should be practised under the guise of honest poverty: for they knew that the consciousness that these things were done, must often and often prevent the really charitably disposed from dispensing the alms which they would otherwise bestow, and that therefore the really deserving suffered for the rascality of practised deceivers.

Early in the forenoon of the following day, Christian and Christina were again in Redcross Street, at the door of the house to which their benevolent purpose brought them. The landlady made her appearance; and the tale which she told, was as gratifying to the twins as it was almost completely unexpected. It appeared that a tall gentleman, with a dark complexion, and wearing a cloak, had called at the house in company with a medical practitioner from the neighbourhood, about two hours after Christina left on the preceding day. The medical attendant ascended to see the invalid, while the gentleman remained below to question the landlady. What followed, had evidently been pre-arranged, and was speedily accomplished. A hackney-coach was fetched—the dying young woman was placed in it—and was borne away to another house, somewhere in the suburbs of Islington. The landlady mentioned the address, and concluded by observing that the tall dark gentleman did not accompany Mary Wright to her new abode, but sent the surgeon with her, placing in his hands a handful of money ere he hurried away.

The twins had no difficulty in recognising Mr. Redcliffe in the tall dark gentleman; and they experienced the utmost delight at all the intelligence which they thus received. They repaired at once to the address named; and on arriving at the house, in an open, airy, and healthy part of Islington, they found that lodgings of the most cheerful and comfortable description had been taken for the poor sufferer—that a nurse had been provided for her—that ample funds had been placed for her benefit in the hands of the landlady, who was a kind, benevolent woman—and that poor Mary Wright herself had received Mr. Redcliffe's assurance, delivered through the medium of the worthy surgeon, that she need have no farther care in respect to her maintenance, as she would be well provided for. Mary Wright had also learnt that it was through Christina she had thus become the object of such noble charity; and we may add that she had not forgotten to inform the medical man of the kindness received from a beautiful young creature with dark hair and eyes, but whose name she had not learnt.

CHAPTER XVI.

INDORA.

It was the eighth evening after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the Princess Indora which has been described in a recent chapter; and we must revisit the secluded abode of that oriental lady. On this occasion we shall find her in the drawing-room, which was furnished with a mingled sumptuousness and elegance corresponding with that species of boudoir where we first beheld her. The draperies were of the costliest description; the sofas and ottomans were covered with a dark green velvet, of so rich a texture and with such a gloss, that it appeared almost a sin for a human form to press upon it. There were chairs in this room, made of some precious wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and having luxurious cushions of the same material as that which covered the ottomans. The ornaments upon the mantel-piece, the nick-nacks upon the tables, the vases filled with flowers, or whence perfumes exhaled their fragrance, were all of the costliest and most curious eastern description. A mellowed lustre, but quite sufficient to flood the apartment, was thrown out by superb chandeliers: a fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—and its blaze was shrouded from the eye by screens curiously painted, and the framework of which was elaborately as well as delicately carved. Fans, formed of the feathers of tropical birds, lay within the reach, wheresoever the Princess might choose at the moment to seat herself; and a large cage, standing on a table near the window, contained within the sphere of its golden wires a dozen or so of birds of the most diminutive size, but in every variety of beautiful plumage.

The Princess Indora was reclining upon a sofa at about the same hour on which, eight days previously, we first introduced her to the reader. She was apparelled in a similarly fanciful style—only that she wore another dress; but the colours of the separate garments were chosen with a most tasteful regard to the delicate duskiness of the complexion, and the nature of the charms they had to set off. Supremely beautiful—eminently handsome indeed—was the Princess Indora, as she reposed, in her oriental garb, upon the velvet sofa in that sumptuously furnished room. And as before too, there were intervals when she was deeply pensive—other intervals when she experienced a nervous excitement: for, as the reader is aware, it was on this evening that she was to receive the final decision of the object of her love.

Presently the door opened; and Sagoonah made her appearance. She entered, bearing the massive silver salver on which was the cut glass containing sherbet, and which she presented on bended knee to the Princess. The Hindoo woman was clad in the same style as that which we have before described, and which was so admirably calculated to set off the lithe bayadere symmetry of her shape, and to leave her form and limbs completely free for every movement and gesture.

"Within the hour that is passing, my faithful Sagoonah," said the Princess, when she had quaffed a portion of the sherbet, "my fate will be sealed. The alternatives between which I am balancing, are happiness and misery. Both are in extremes—and there is no medium in which I may take refuge. You, Sagoonah, who have been my confidante—you who have served me so faithfully—you who shrank not from accompanying me on my long, long journey to a strange clime,—you, I say, must feel some anxiety as to the result of this evening's interview?"

"I do, lady," responded Sagoonah; and as she stood somewhat aside, her eyes suddenly flashed strange fires.

"You know, Sagoonah," continued the Princess, "how fondly—how devotedly I have for years loved that man! You know how god-like was his beauty when first he became my father's prisoner——"

"I know it, Princess," responded Sagoonah. "I was then a girl of about ten years of age."

"And I was fifteen," observed the Princess, in a low musing tone. "Yes—fifteen years have elapsed since the first day that I beheld Clement Redcliffe! He was the first Englishman that I had ever seen——"

"The first too, your Highness, that I ever saw;" interjected Sagoonah: and though her words were uttered with that profound respect which had become habitual to her, it was nevertheless with a slight air of abstraction that she thus spoke.

"Fifteen years—the most precious ones of my life," continued Indora, "have been passed in a love that has been all but hopeless. No—not hopeless—for if so, I could not have existed: but it is at least a love that has experienced no reciprocity. Yes—handsome as some being of a higher world, was that Englishman when first we met! He tells me that he is changed now—and that the marks of age are coming thickly and rapidly upon him. If so, I behold them not—or scarcely. What to me is it if his form should change, when his mind still shines with the never dimning, imperishable light of one of these gems?"—and her looks settled upon a bracelet studded with diamonds of the largest size and of the most dazzling brilliancy. "Methought," continued the Princess, "that so long as he was a prisoner in my father's capital, his proud soul would disdain to bend itself towards her who was the daughter of him who held him captive. Aye—and more than that—he learnt by some means, I know not how, that when my father would have given him his liberty, it was in compliance with *my* secret promptings that he still retained him a prisoner. Yes—I *did* so prompt my father: for much as I loved Clement Redcliffe—deeply, deeply as I took his welfare to heart—I could not possibly bring myself to say the word which should make him free, and thus incur the risk of losing him for ever. He escaped—you are aware how: you know too how wild was my anguish—how bitter my grief, when I received the tidings of his flight. But then I thought to myself that perhaps now that he was free, he might no longer look upon me as one who was wronging him: he might forget the past—or at least pardon it, on account of all the love I bore him. I flattered myself too, that this love so deep, so devoted, so imperishable, could scarcely fail to beget a kindred feeling. The eagle requires ample space for the play of his huge wings and the soaring of his ambitious flight: and so I thought that the proud soul of Clement Redcliffe, when enjoying the freedom of the whole world's range, might look upon me with a different regard from that with which it was wont to survey me in the narrow circuit of my father's capital. Sagoonah, think you that this hope will be disappointed?"

"Princess," responded the Hindoo dependant, "I am but little accustomed to read the human heart: and the heart of an Englishman appears to me as inscrutable as the mysteries of some forbidden book."

"True!—you cannot judge it," observed the Princess, in a low musing tone. "And moreover, you have never loved, Sagoonah. No—you have never loved: you know not what love is. You have been attached to me from your childhood; and if you had experienced the slightest scintillation of that passion which I feel, you would have told me—or I should have discovered it. Is it not so, Sagoonah?"—and the Princess raised her large lustrous eyes, dark as those of the gazelle, towards the countenance of her dependant.

"It is so, lady," responded Sagoonah, in a low but firm voice.

"I marvel that you never loved," proceeded Indora, still in that same musing manner as before. "It appears to me that a heart susceptible of love must be invariably associated with beauty of the person:—it seems as if beauty, being formed to create love, ought to prove susceptible of the fire which it kindles. And you, my faithful Sagoonah, possess charms superior to any of your sex or *caste*, in your own native land. Yes, you are handsome—very handsome!"—and now the eyes of the Princess wandered slowly, and with a certain degree of listless abstraction, over the bayadere-like form of her attendant.

Sagoonah stood perfectly motionless—her figure upright as a dart—her head somewhat inclined forward, like a flower upon its stalk: and yet in that uprightness there was neither ungraceful stiffness nor inelegant rigidity. She seemed to feel that, as a slave, she was bound to submit with all becoming respect to that survey on the part of her mistress. Had an observer been present, he could not have avoided thinking to himself that they were two of the most splendid specimens of oriental beauty, of distinct shades of complexion.

"And have you never thought to yourself, Sagoonah," asked the Princess Indora, "that you would like to know what love is?—have you never felt a craving to experience that sentiment which plays the chiefest part in all the affairs of this life? Has there been no curiosity in your soul to learn the joy, the delight, the happiness of love?"

The Hindoo woman's cheeks glowed as if with the purple flush of wine,—the rich red blood mantling through the transparency of her dusky skin: but the ruddy hue passed away as quickly as it rose up; and when the Princess again slowly turned her eyes upon the countenance of Sagoonah, it had its wonted look and expression again.

"Yes—within the hour that is passing," said Indora, suddenly reverting to that topic which was most vitally interesting to herself, and without observing that her dependant had not answered the questions which she had put to her,—"my fate must be sealed!"

"And if the Englishman's decision be against your happiness, dear mistress of mine," said Sagoonah, now sinking on one knee and looking with affectionate earnestness up into Indora's countenance, "what will your Highness do?"

"Ah! what will I do?" she murmured, as an expression of anguish at the bare thought, flitted over her superb features. "What will I do, Sagoonah?"—then after a pause, during which she seemed to reflect profoundly, she added in accents of mingled mournfulness and despair, "Heaven only knows what I shall do!"

"But yet, dear lady, you have every hope—have you not?" inquired Sagoonah, as she still knelt by the velvet-covered ottoman, and still gazed earnestly up into the countenance of Indora. "Do you not imagine, beloved Princess, that the sense of obligation is greater than that of wrong in the mind of the Englishman? If your Royal father kept him captive for so many, many years, he at least treated him with all becoming hospitality: he lodged him in his own palace—he gave him slaves to minister unto him—a guard of honour to attend upon him—and riches to dispose of as he thought fit."

"Aye—but you understand not the proud soul of an Englishman!" replied the Princess Indora: "you comprehend not that however brilliant the circumstances of his captivity, it is captivity all the same! The chains may be of gold—but they are still chains which he burns to throw off. Like the bird in his gilded cage, he is dazzled not by the sumptuousness of his dwelling—but pants for the fresh air of freedom: and so it was with Clement Redcliffe. He knew that the slaves were spies upon his actions—that the guards, though ostensibly appointed to do him honour, were naught else than gaolers and custodians—and that the riches heaped upon him, were mere toys to render his captivity somewhat the less intolerable."

"And yet the Englishman bore himself courteously and well towards your Royal father and your Highness's self," observed Sagoonah.

"It was with a cold courtesy," responded Indora; "and all that Clement Redcliffe did, was doubtless for the purpose of conciliating my sire in the hope of obtaining his freedom all the more quickly. Besides, the natural pride of a civilised Englishman could not help feeling flattered by being placed in a position to smooth down the asperities of our own semi-barbarism. Clement Redcliffe inculcated the arts of peace, and by his counsel enabled my father to amend those laws that were bad, and to promulgate new ones that were good, so as to forward the interests and promote the happiness of the people of Inderabad. But not one single suggestion in the art of war did Clement Redcliffe ever proffer: nor would he afford the slightest insight into the discipline of those English troops who have rendered themselves so formidable in our native clime. Do you comprehend wherefore he maintained so inexorable a reserve upon those points?"

"Doubtless, lady," answered Sagoonah, "he thought that the time might come when the English invaders would push their conquests to your Royal parent's far-off kingdom, and therefore he would not put a weapon, even the smallest and the bluntest, in the hands of your august father's troops—for fear lest it should be used sooner or later against the armies of his own fellow-countrymen."

"Yes—these were his motives," rejoined the Princess; "and they rendered him all the more admirable—all the more noble, in my estimation. But I was ere now explaining how it was that Clement Redcliffe, while enduring his captivity, took a pride in propagating the arts of peace amongst us. Yet month after month and year after year did he demand his freedom; and at length my father would have given it——but I, alas——"

The Princess stopped short; and Sagoonah, slowly rising from her kneeling position, retreated to a respectful distance, where she stood in her wonted attitude—her bayadere form upright, and her face inclining towards the splendidly modelled bust which the arrangements of her linen dress left more than half revealed.

"'Twas strange," proceeded Indora, after a brief pause, and again speaking in a musing manner, "that my interference should have come to Clement Redcliffe's knowledge: for my father would scarcely have spoken of it. Doubtless it was a surmise, though a correct one, on Redcliffe's part: but how bitter were the reproaches which he levelled against me at the time! Ah, that was a scene of fearful excitement which I can never forget!"

"Your Highness has suffered much for your love's sake," observed Sagoonah gently.

"Love is a rose with thorns," answered Indora, in a mournful voice: "and perhaps, my faithful Sagoonah, it is fortunate for you that you have never experienced that sentiment. To me it has proved a source of illimitable happiness and of almost overwhelming affliction—the soul alternating between a paradise of bliss and Satan's kingdom. No, Sagoonah—seek not to learn what love is!—avoid it if you have the power! Happier—far happier are you than your unfortunate mistress!"

"Is hope, then, at this instant dead within the bosom of your Highness?" inquired the Hindoo dependant.

"Oh, how can I explain the exact nature of my own feelings?" cried Indora, almost petulantly. "When the ocean is agitated into mighty waves, the bark which is floating over it, rises at one moment to the summit of a billow, and is the next plunged down into the abyss. So it is with my heart—now at one instant elevated by hope, at another plunged into despair. For the vessel, when thus storm-tossed, beholds from the summit of the billows the beacon-light shining afar off and marking the entrance of the refuge-harbour: but when borne down into the deep, deep trough of the sea, the mariner on board his vessel beholds naught save the dark gloomy menacing waters around him. And so, again, is it with my heart. Now, Sagoonah, you comprehend all the mingled pleasures and pains—the ecstatic hopes and the intervals of blank despair—the thrilling joy and the deep despondency—the fervid expectations and the wildering apprehensions, which make up the sum of love. Seek not to know it, my faithful Sagoonah!—seek not to know it! It is your fond mistress who counsels you thus."

Having thus spoken, Indora made a hasty and somewhat impatient sign; and Sagoonah glided forth from the sumptuously furnished apartment.

Scarcely had the Hindoo woman reached the foot of the staircase, when a knock and ring called her to the front door; and on opening it, Mr. Redcliffe stepped across the threshold. He was, as usual, enveloped in his ample cloak; and his hat was drawn over his countenance—not as if, while coming hither, he had more than at any other time studied to avoid observation; but such appeared to be his invariable habit when moving about the streets of the mighty metropolis. As he placed his hat upon the hall-table, and put off his cloak, he flung a look upon Sagoonah: for the impression of her haunting eyes was still strong upon his mind—and he doubtless now regarded her to see whether she again looked at him in that same strange fashion which had sent a vague and unknown trouble into the depths of his soul. But it was not so. The Hindoo woman, having closed the front door, stood in readiness to conduct Mr. Redcliffe into the presence of her mistress: her demeanour was that of an oriental slave—her looks cast down, and the brilliant lustre of her eyes veiled by the thick jetty fringes which formed such dark lines, so that the very duskiness of her complexion appeared pale and light in comparison therewith.

Another minute, and Mr. Redcliffe again stood before the Indian Princess.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DECISION.

It would be impossible to describe the feelings with which Indora became aware that this man who was the arbiter of her destiny, was now once more in her presence. She rose to a sitting posture on the velvet-covered sofa: but she dared not throw a single glance towards him. Hope and despair were strangely agitating in her heart—blending too, although in confliction,—paradoxical as the expression may seem. It was natural that she should seek to prolong this hope as much as possible—and that, on the other hand, she should not rush forward as it were to find herself face to face with despair, until imperiously compelled to envisage it. The colour went and came in rapid transitions upon her cheeks,—blushing and disappearing through the transparency of her delicately dusky skin: while her bosom rose and sank with quick heavings.

"My promise is kept," said Clement Redcliffe, speaking in his wonted accents of mournfulness, but in all the harmony of his rich manly voice; "and your Highness will now probably explain wherefore you demanded this interval of eight days' delay?"

Indora motioned Redcliffe to take a seat by her side; and now her eyes were turned slowly upon him. Hope and fear trembled in that glance: love and apprehension vibrated in that look. She dreaded what his decision might be—and yet she sought to put away from her own mind the contemplation of the very worst. The Englishman placed himself on the ottoman at a distance which was properly respectful towards a lady of her princely rank—but which was little calculated to encourage the hope that her loving heart sustained in conflict with the strength of despair.

"Yes, I will explain myself," said Indora, with a sudden sensation of delight that she was thus furnished by his very words with an opportunity of again appealing to the tenderest feelings of his nature. "I besought this brief delay in the conviction that during the interval, you would not fail to ponder well and profoundly upon the decision towards the proclamation of which each passing day brought you nearer and nearer. Then I thought to myself that every proof of my devoted love—every evidence of my imperishable affection, would present itself to your memory, and that the whole, accumulating with force and power, would rule your mind in my favour. I thought to myself that you would recollect how the mightiest Princes of my own native clime sought my hand in marriage, but that I rejected every proposal for *your* sake. I thought too, that you would bear in mind how by those refusals I drew down upon myself my father's anger——"

"Your Highness had little to fear from the King's indignation," interrupted Redcliffe: "for your influence over him was complete."

"The allusion is ungenerous," observed Indora softly, and half reproachfully. "It is meant to remind me that I stood as a barrier in the way of your freedom, and that I over-ruled my father's favourable inclinations, when towards the end of your captivity he was about to yield to your often-repeated prayer to be liberated from it. Yes: it was a crime—a dark branding crime which I thus affixed upon myself——But, Oh! I felt that it was death to part from you; and I had not the courage—deeply, devotedly as I loved you—to lay such suicidal hands upon myself!"

"Oh! if you had given me my liberty," exclaimed Redcliffe, "I should have fallen at your feet and worshipped you as an angel! This is the hour for the fullest explanations—and I came prepared to give them. Think you, Indora, that when first becoming a captive in your father's sovereign city, I yielded to his request to instruct your then youthful mind—for you were but fifteen years of age,—think you, I ask, that I accepted the duties of a preceptor from any love which I bore towards your father, who had deprived me of my freedom? Know you not that the King's action was one which we Europeans regard as the basest and the vilest? I went to the Court of Inderabad as an accredited emissary from the Anglo-Indian Government; and regardless of the laws of nations, your father held me captive. Reports were spread that I had perished, along with my suite, in one of your Indian jungles; and thus the authorities at Calcutta adopted no measures to procure my liberation. I found myself thrown entirely on my own resources; and methought that if I sedulously devoted myself to whatsoever tasks the King your father should prescribe unto me—and if they were honourable ones—he would be all the more speedily moved to compassion, and would give me my freedom. And then, too, I thought that if I aided in the expansion of your natural intelligence—if I taught you our European accomplishments,—and by such inculcations as I was enabled to impart, rendered you the most brilliant Princess of all the northern and independent region of the great peninsula of Hindostan,—you would experience a gratitude which would raise me up a friend to intercede with that King who held me in captivity. And perhaps, too, I was flattered somewhat —for I was much younger *then*—by finding myself placed in a position and furnished with an opportunity to carry European civilization into the midst of the oriental barbarism of your father's kingdom; and therefore did I address myself readily, and even cheerfully, to the tasks that were allotted to me. But that gratitude, Indora, which I expected at your hands—I received it not!"

"No — not gratitude!" replied the Indian Princess, suddenly starting with the enthusiasm of her feelings: "it was naught so cold as mere gratitude that I gave you—it was my love!"

"Ah! but that love was so far fatal to me," rejoined Redcliffe, "that it prolonged my captivity. Do you recollect, Indora, that on one occasion I even humbled myself at your very feet to implore my release from your father's capital?"

"I remember it, alas! but too well," responded the eastern lady. "It was when an English traveller was found dead—slain by robbers in a wood near the city—and when the papers and documents he had about him were brought to the palace——"

"Yes!" cried Redcliffe, with exceeding bitterness, and as a strange look that was akin to rage swept over his countenance: "for amongst those papers there was an English journal which contained something that regarded myself. Yes, Indora—it *was* after reading that journal that I threw myself at your feet, and besought you to give that consent which your Royal father had already vouchsafed, but which you had refused to second."

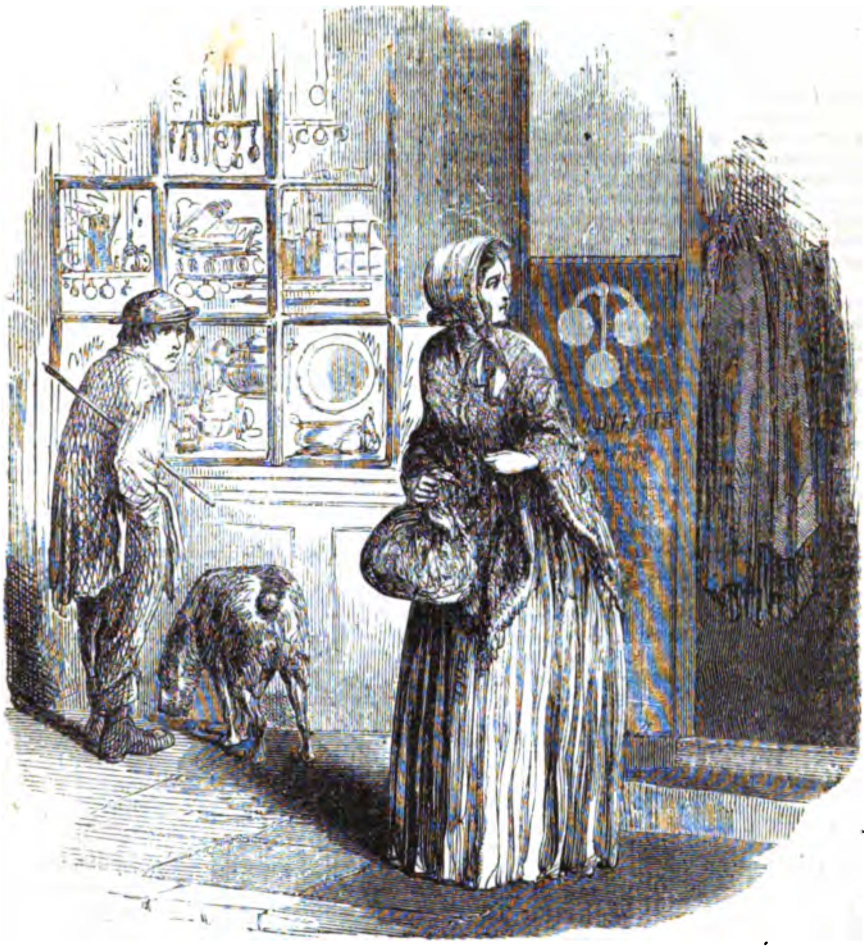
"I know it but too well," answered the Princess, who had shrunk back in mournful dismay from the strange look which Redcliffe's countenance had transiently expressed; "and I repeat, it was a crime on my part—a foul treachery, whereof I have since deeply and sincerely repented. But why all these reiterations? why taunt me thus with what I have done? Heaven knows——and I speak of that heaven into the holy mysteries of which you yourself initiated me by the inculcation of the Christian creed——Heaven knows, I say, that I erred through love—that I was guilty through my mad fondness for you! Oh, use not my conduct of that time as a pretext and as an excuse for proclaiming a decision which is to consign me to despair! There is no other misdeed with which you can reproach me, Clement Redcliffe. I was in my girlhood when first you knew me:—for long years had you your eye ever upon me—and you know whether my life has been stainless and immaculate or not?"

"Indora," answered Redcliffe, now evidently much moved, "not for a single instant can I hesitate to do justice to your numerous virtues. I admitted, when we were together eight days back, that I had received much good as well as much evil at the hands of your father and yourself. The riches which I possess, were conferred upon me by your sire: but I felt that I had earned them—or else not a single one of the priceless gems and the costly gifts which had been showered upon me, should I have borne away with me when I at length succeeded in effecting my escape! Nevertheless, though I earned all that wealth by long years of devoted application to the tasks prescribed me by your father, I am not the less grateful to the source whence those riches emanated. All this I do not deny: on the contrary I wish you to understand the precise feelings of my heart;—for this is an occasion of no ordinary importance, inasmuch as I see, alas! that the happiness of a fellow creature is deeply involved."

"You pity me?" said Indora: and hope flashed in her fine dark eyes.

"Yes—I pity you," responded Redcliffe,—"if neither as a woman nor a Princess you consider the avowal to be an insult. But I was about to declare that had you, Indora, behaved more generously towards me—had you frankly, and with that nobleness of heart for which I once gave you credit—consented to my freedom when your Royal father had agreed thereto, it might have been—— yes, it might have been different now! I should have retained such a deep impression of gratitude towards you, that whatsoever sacrifice of my own feelings it might have cost to ensure your happiness, the word—the affirmative syllable—might possibly have gone forth from my lips! Ah, Indora, think you that I can forget how I flung myself at your feet on the same day that I read in the English journal—it was two years ago—that which so nearly concerned myself? think you that I can forget how I besought, and entreated, and wept—and all so vainly? And in the wildness of the language to which I gave vent, I even said enough to give you at least some faint insight into those reasons so urgent—so vitally important to myself—which had suddenly transpired to render me more than ever anxious to retain my liberty. And yet you refused!"

"Clement," responded Indora, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes, streaming down her



cheeks, and trickling upon the bosom which palpitated as if it would burst,—"you yourself were a witness of the almost mortal anguish which it cost me to pronounce that refusal. I bade you abandon all thoughts of returning to a land which, from the few words you let drop, I saw but too well you had no reason to love: I offered you my hand——I, a great Princess, humbled myself far more to you, than you, with all your pride of an Englishman, could possibly humble yourself to me!——I gave you the assurance that my father would consent to our union—that you yourself might become a Prince—that at his death the diadem of Inderabad should descend upon your brows—and that you should sit upon a throne! But more than all this I offered you!——I offered you the fondest, most devoted love which woman's heart could entertain for man: and think you therefore, Clement Redcliffe, that when you refused all these proffers, I had no woman's pride that was wounded—and that perhaps for a moment there was some transient shade of vindictiveness strangely commingling with the very love that I bore you? Reflect upon all this! You yourself have taught me how weak and feeble is human nature—how poor the human heart! Can you not therefore make allowances for all that I felt and for all that I did on the occasion of which you have spoken? Besides, you should not judge me according to the severe rules by which you would estimate the conduct of a woman of your own native clime. No, no—it were too cruel—I am too much to be pitied—and you are too just!"

"You possess, Indora, too fine an intelligence, and feelings too delicately susceptible," answered Redcliffe, "to think that this last reason which you have urged, is the best and most forceful of any which you have as yet advanced. Remember that you are not altogether of Hindoo extraction. Your father is a native Prince—but your mother was a Georgian; and hence the comparative fairness of your complexion. But we must not argue longer on the subject. You now understand me, Indora, much better perhaps than ever you did before; and I on the other hand am willing to believe that you yourself regret that portion of your conduct which must be but too well calculated to inspire such remorseful feeling. Therefore I appeal to your generosity—I appeal to that feminine delicacy which characterises you—I appeal to all those good and virtuous principles which have rendered your life so stainless,—by all these I appeal that you will accept my decision as a final one——and this decision is, that we part now to meet no more!"

The Princess Indora pressed her hand to her brow; and a faint half-stifled shriek burst from her lips. The next moment, in a paroxysm of indescribable agony, she threw herself upon her knees; and extending her clasped hands towards Redcliffe, cried in a frantic voice, "You are killing me! you are killing me!"

"For heaven's sake give not thus way to your feelings!"—and he hastened to raise her up.

It seemed as if she were about to faint: she clung to him—and her head drooped upon his breast. He was forced to sustain her: but he gently placed her upon the ottoman—and standing before her, he said, "Indora, if you ever loved me, I beseech you to fulfil your promise and respect my decision!"

She had for a moment covered her countenance with her hands; and her entire form was shaken with a low convulsive sob. Slowly now she removed those hands; and looking up towards the Englishman with such ineffable woe depicted upon her features that it made his very heart bleed to contemplate the spectacle, she said in the profound voice of despair, "Yes—I will respect your decision."

Clement Redcliffe was about to extend his hand and bid the Princess a last farewell,—when a thought struck him—and he lingered: but still he knew not how to shape the request which he had to make—for a request it was.

"Indora," at length he said, "I will not ask if it is with a feeling of anger you are about to behold me go forth from your presence—because I know that from all you have been saying, you are no longer capable of experiencing the slightest vindictiveness towards me."

"No, Clement Redcliffe," she answered solemnly, but at the same time with a visible effort keeping back an ebullition of the strongest feelings: "rather than do you an injury, I would lay down my life to serve you!"

The Englishman was profoundly touched by this assurance. The reader has seen enough of him to be aware that he was naturally generous-hearted—indeed of a fine chivalrous character, notwithstanding that so large a portion of his life had been spent in captivity, and that this circumstance, as well as others, had tended to sour his mind and warp some of his better feelings. Yes—he was generous-hearted; and the assurance which the unfortunate Princess had just given, could not fail to touch him profoundly. Besides, he would have been something less or something more than man if he had remained altogether inaccessible to the impress which that fond woman's devoted love was so well calculated to make—even though it were a love which he himself could not reciprocate. It therefore cut him to the very soul—it made his heart bleed—it awakened sensibilities which he had fancied crushed, or at least buried in eternal slumber—it staggered the very resolve which had ere now gone forth from his lips!

He resumed his seat on the sofa—perhaps a little nearer to the Princess than he was placed during all the former part of the interview; and she followed him with her eyes, in which some faint gleam of hope glittered again—but yet so feebly, because she dared not allow herself to entertain it.

"Indora," suddenly exclaimed Redcliffe, with almost passionate vehemence—and such a paroxysm of feeling was indeed most rare on his part,—"it is impossible I can leave you thus! I regret having said anything that might seem to savour of reproach: I am sorry that I should have dwelt so long and so emphatically on your conduct in prolonging my captivity in India. But heavens! if you were aware of all the mischief which was thus entailed upon me——and you *can* in part comprehend it, from those words which I let drop on the memorable occasion when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain in the palace of Inderabad——Oh! if you knew all you would pardon any bitterness that tinctured my words!"

"It would be impossible, Clement," answered the Princess mildly—almost meekly, "for *you* to give me offence. My unfortunate love has tamed my disposition: I no longer think and feel with the pride of a King's daughter—but with the humility and the suffering of a poor weak woman!"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Redcliffe, visibly struggling with himself as the resolve which he had pronounced was more and more staggered by each successive proof of Indora's illimitable devotion: "how can I endure to torture you, while you display so much goodness?"

He rose and paced the apartment with hurried and uneven steps. That man whose wont it was to be so mournfully grave and so coldly reserved—so shut up, as it were, in the secret sorrows of his own inscrutable heart—was now a prey to the profoundest agitation. Indora followed him with her eyes: that very agitation afflicted her on the one hand, while it partially seemed to encourage hope on the other; and the tears again streamed down her cheeks—again trickled upon the gorgeous bust which the open caftan and the low under-garment left half-revealed.

"Indora," said Redcliffe, abruptly resuming his seat by her side, "I cannot leave you thus—my very nature revolts against it! And yet for heaven's sake buoy not up yourself with immediate hope: for *that* could not possibly be fulfilled at once——No, sternly and implacably should I refuse, even though you were at this moment at the point of death and an affirmative syllable from my lips could alone save you! But yet——"

He stopped short: and it was with breathless suspense—with fixed eyes—dilated nostrils—lips apart—head bent forward—and bosom upheaved, that Indora sat in the attitude of one who awaits a sound which she expects to hear but which she is afraid may escape her.

"Princess," continued Redcliffe, "allusion has been made more than once during our interview, to those few words which I let drop from my lips when I knelt at your feet by the side of the marble fountain. To what precise extent the revelation contained in those words might have reached, I have no accurate remembrance: my thoughts were full of wildness at the time—my brain was distracted—the scene itself, when looked back upon, appears to be enveloped in a sort of misty dreaminess. However, that I *did* make some avowal—that I *did* let fall something in that unguarded moment—I recollect full well. I have now a request to make——"

"You need not give utterance to it," responded the Princess: "I can read your thoughts. You desire that the seal of secrecy shall remain upon my lips——Good heavens, Clement! do you think that I would betray a syllable that was calculated to do you an injury?"

"And after that assurance," exclaimed Redcliffe, "I dare not—I must not prove altogether ungrateful. Listen to me, Indora. You comprehend sufficient from those words which I let fall—and the necessity of keeping which inviolably secret you seem fully to understand—that my presence in England is connected with a matter of vital importance to myself. Yes—I have a specific object to accomplish; and to that must all my thoughts and all my energies be devoted. It may be achieved quickly; or it may take years to be worked out——heaven alone can tell! But that same heaven can by its own inscrutable ways further my objects and conduct them to a speedy and a successful issue. Until that issue be accomplished, I am not master of my own actions—I am not even able to dispose of myself. But this is what I have to say, Indora—that if when my purpose is achieved, and if circumstances should leave me a free agent, then will I be mindful of this devoted love of your's—and then you shall not vainly implore at my feet!"

"Oh, is this possible?" exclaimed the delighted Princess: and sinking upon her knees, she took Redcliffe's hand, pressing it in fervour to her lips.

"Rise, Indora—rise! This suppliant posture must not be assumed to me!"

"But you have given me hope—I am no longer miserable——I am happy——Oh, I am joyously happy!"—and she sprang up to her feet, her magnificent countenance radiant with the altered feelings that were thus suddenly excited in her soul.

"Cherish that hope if you will, Indora," said the Englishman,—"cherish it if it will make you happy—and I swear to you that if circumstances permit, it shall be fulfilled! But until that time, think not to behold me again."

"Oh! I can endure separation so long as there is hope," exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of gushing enthusiasm. "I have waited so long to receive from your lips a single syllable of hope, that I can wait longer yet for that hope's realization. But tell me——you say when the time shall come——are you confident that it *will* come sooner or later?"

"Yes—it will come," answered Redcliffe,—"it will come, rest assured!—or there would be no justice in heaven itself!"

With these words he abruptly quitted the room; and Indora, sinking upon the ottoman, almost overcome with the joyousness of her feelings, murmured to herself, "There is hope! there is hope!"

Notwithstanding the violent agitation which Clement Redcliffe had experienced towards the close of this interview, the instant the door of the drawing-room shut behind him, he regained his habitual air of mournful gravity: so that it would have been impossible for any observer to gather from his looks a single scintillation of what had been passing. He descended the staircase, and found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford him egress. He put on his cloak—took up his hat—and was turning towards the door with an abruptness of movement which he often unconsciously displayed,—when again he caught the eyes of the Hindoo woman fixed upon him with the strange burning brightness of their regards. He stopped short instinctively: those eyes were instantaneously veiled by their long jetty fringes—the intenseness of the spell which had for a moment riveted him, was thus as suddenly withdrawn—and in silence he hurried forth from Shrubbery Villa. But as he sped along the bye-lane leading to the main road, he again felt as if he were under the incomprehensible spell-like influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

The Hindoo woman, having closed the front door behind Mr. Redcliffe, ascended the stairs, and glided into the drawing-room with her wonted noiseless step. Sinking upon her knees at the feet of the Princess, she looked up into her countenance—and at once read there an answer to the question which, as a slave, she scarcely dared ask. For an instant Sagoonah's eyes flashed brightly; and then they were cast down again.

"I understand you, my faithful dependant," said Indora, passing her beautifully modelled hand caressingly over the Hindoo woman's jet black hair, so smoothly brushed. "The kind interest you feel in me renders you impatient to know the result. You have partially read it on my features—and your eyes glistened with a sensation of joy. Yes, Sagoonah—I am no longer in a state of uncertainty—I am permitted to hope!"

The Hindoo woman took the Princess's hand, and raised it to her lips. At the same time Indora felt a burning tear-drop fall upon that hand; and again caressing the dependant, she said in a kind soothing voice, "You weep for joy, my faithful Sagoonah—you weep for joy!—and I love you for this fresh evidence of your devoted affection."

Sagoonah kissed her mistress's hand once more; and slowly rising from her kneeling posture, she retreated to a little distance,—her tall symmetrical shape drawn up as usual, so that it displayed the beautiful bend of the back, the straightness of all the limbs, and the sculptural modelling of all the contours. Her countenance was inclined (as was its wont when she was in that position) towards her bosom; and she remained motionless as a statue.

"Sagoonah," said the Princess, after a long pause, during which she reflected profoundly, "tell Mark to come to me at once."

The dependant quitted the room; and in a few minutes a man-servant made his appearance. He was dressed in plain clothes,—a neat suit of black, with a white cravat. He was of the middle age—quiet and sedate-looking—but with a certain honesty and frankness of countenance which would at once have prepossessed a beholder in his favour. He bowed low to Indora, and stood in silence to await her commands. We should observe that although he knew full well that she was of princely rank, yet he addressed her not, when speaking, with the highest title properly belonging thereto, but with an inferior one: for in order to avoid unpleasant observation and gossiping curiosity, Indora passed not as a Princess in England, but merely as a wealthy lady of Hindostan. Two female dependants (Sagoonah and another) together with a native male-servant, had accompanied her from Inderabad. The Englishman, whose Christian name was Mark, had been hired by her at Calcutta to serve as her intendant, steward, and butler—the comptroller, in short, of her little household. He therefore knew who she was: but Sagoonah *alone* of those who had accompanied her from India, was acquainted with the real object of her Highness's visit to England. It was Mark who on the arrival in London had procured the villa for the Princess's accommodation; and in all respects he had proved himself efficient and trustworthy. While we are speaking of the household, we may as well add that besides the domestics already mentioned, there was a groom and coachman: for the Princess had at once bought a carriage and a pair of horses on settling at the villa. The coachman did not sleep in the house—the groom occupied an apartment over the stables; and these two last-named dependants were in total ignorance of the high rank of their mistress.

We may now continue the thread of our narrative,—taking it up at the point where Mark had entered the drawing-room in pursuance of the summons sent by the Princess through Sagoonah.

"Is it possible, Mark," inquired Indora, "to obtain any English newspapers that go back for several years?"

"All English newspapers, please your ladyship," was the domestic's response, "are filed at certain places in London; and it is even possible sometimes to purchase a complete set of any particular newspaper."

"In that case," resumed Indora, with satisfaction upon her countenance, "I must get you, the very first thing to-morrow, to procure me a file for the last twenty years. Do you think you can accomplish it? Spare not gold——"

"Everything, please your ladyship, can be procured in this country by means of money. By noon to-morrow I pledge myself that your ladyship shall be in possession of a file of newspapers."

The domestic then bowed and withdrew.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRUGGLES.

Two months had elapsed since the occurrences which we have been relating; and it now verged towards the close of December. During these two months poor Mary Wright had breathed her last, and was consigned to the grave. Almost daily did Christina visit the perishing creature; and for hours would she at times remain with her,—assisting the nurse and the landlady of the house in their kind assiduities towards smoothing the progress of the victim to another world. Mr. Redcliffe called occasionally to inquire at the front door how the invalid was: but he never sought her presence—he did not choose to be thanked for all that he was doing for her. His purse however afforded ample proof of the generous sympathy which he experienced on her behalf: for she was not merely surrounded with comforts, but even with luxuries. Her benefactor's conduct in thus avoiding her presence, may appear eccentric: but on the other hand, it was full of kindness and consideration. Frequently would the most delicious and expensive fruits be delivered at the house,—fruits that must have cost gold in Covent Garden Market; and there was no difficulty in conjecturing from whom they came. When she breathed her last, Mr. Redcliffe gave instructions that her remains were to be decently interred; and he liberally rewarded the nurse, the landlady, and the medical attendant.

He would have rewarded Christina likewise, only he knew not that she stood in need of succour; and he would have been afraid of insulting her by offering her any testimonial of his appreciation of her goodness towards the perished one. Well aware was he of this goodness: he had not merely learnt in the first instance how Christina had behaved when she visited Mary Wright in Redcross Street—but he had also been informed by the landlady of the house at Islington, of Miss Ashton's frequent visits there. But it so happened that whenever Mr. Redcliffe called, Christina never came up to the door at the same time; so that since that encounter in Redcross Street, Mr. Redcliffe and the twins had not once met. Christian was in the habit of seeing his sister as far as the house, it being at no very great distance from their own lodging at Camden Town; and then he would set off in search of a situation,—returning at an hour previously appointed, to fetch his sister and conduct her home again.

But during these two months Christian had found no situation and Christina no work. They had both used every endeavour to procure such employment as was respectively fitted for each—and they had failed. There seemed at this period of the orphans' lives to be a kind of fatality which influenced them with its evil spell. We need not enter into particulars in respect to the numerous applications made by each in countless quarters, nor the nature of the refusals—sometimes rebuffs—which they had to encounter. They had called upon Mrs. Macaulay: but she was unable to give them any recommendations to particular quarters; and, as the reader is aware, they were in all other respects friendless—those two poor orphans—in the great metropolis. Mrs. Macaulay, having perceived several instances of Mr. Redcliffe's charitable disposition, had thought of mentioning to him the gloomy prospects of the twins: but somehow or another she always forgot to do so when she had an opportunity. These opportunities were indeed rare enough—for Mr. Redcliffe, soon discovering that she was of a gossiping character, invariably cut her short whenever she seemed to threaten him with a long discourse.

Never in the presence of Mary Wright, while she yet remained alive, did Christina drop the slightest allusion to her own position—though it had daily been becoming worse and worse; and many and many an hour did she give to the dying young woman, when, but for her, she would have been roaming about from place to place, wherever there appeared a chance of procuring needle work.

Before continuing the narrative, we must remark, in addition to the above explanations, that during the time which had elapsed since the orphans quitted Mrs. Macaulay's house, they had seen nothing more of Lord Octavian Meredith. They had requested that Mrs. Macaulay would not mention their new abode to that Mr. Percival who had once called, if he should happen to call again. The twins had their own little pride as well as other people; and they did not choose to be visited in their more humble lodging by one who was evidently moving in the best sphere of society. Besides, Christina herself had felt that for other reasons, which her feminine delicacy naturally suggested, it would be better that such an acquaintance should be discontinued. Not, be it understood, that she knew or even suspected that under the name of Mr. Percival an aristocratic title was disguised: but a becoming sense of propriety made her comprehend that situated as she was, with no other protector than a brother of her own age—a mere youth—it were imprudent to receive the visits of a fashionable young gentleman of whom she knew comparatively nothing.

The reader will recollect that we glanced hurriedly at the resources possessed by the orphans when they left Mrs. Macaulay's: we stated that in addition to a good stock of clothes, they had some fourteen or fifteen pounds in money, besides a few articles of jewellery of some value. The outlay on Mary Wright's part had made a certain inroad upon the pecuniary portion of those resources: their lodgings were ten shillings a week—they had now occupied them exactly nine weeks—and therefore it is easy to calculate that by this time their money was exhausted. They had lived with all possible frugality, allowing themselves mere necessaries; and as day by day went by, beholding the gradual decrease of their money-stock, until the very last sixpence was expended,—those same successive days bringing no brightening prospect in respect to the chances of obtaining employment,—the poor orphans naturally grew more and more dispirited.

And now at length the day came when they had no money left. What was to be done? To seek assistance of Mrs. Macaulay, was out of the question. They did not altogether understand her mercenary disposition—they did not precisely expect a refusal, if they did address themselves to her: but they felt that they had no right to do so—that they had no claim upon her—and that even if they had, they saw no chance of fixing a date for the refunding of any loan which she might advance. The orphans deliberated mournfully and tearfully. They embraced each other—they endeavoured to impart mutual consolation: but it was all in vain—for they had none to offer. Yet something must be done! Christina's mind was made up: she could suffer privations herself—but she could not endure the idea that her beloved brother should want bread. He himself was racked by the same thought on her behalf; and he was about to propose that he should go and do that which Christina herself had resolved upon doing. It was in the afternoon of a chill December day when this deliberation took place; and Christina, on a certain pretext, got her brother to go off to some distance. She spoke of a place where he had called a few days back to ask for employment as a clerk: he had received no decisive answer, though the evasive one was almost tantamount to a refusal;—and his sister now suggested that he should go and apply once more. She knew—or at least she feared, that the walk would be an unavailing one; and it cut her to the quick to think that her poor brother's feelings were again to be wounded by a rebuff. But still she preferred that he should even endure this, than have to experience that still deeper humiliation which in the love she bore him she now purposed to take upon herself.

Christian set out; and when he was gone, Christina unlocked her work-box, lifted out the upper part, and drew forth a small packet tied round with tape. She unfastened the tape—she opened the packet—and tears trickled down her lovely pale cheeks, as she contemplated the articles therein contained. One was a long tress of raven hair—a tress that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen—aye, or the envy of one. This tress the poor girl placed to her lips, and kissed it reverently, devoutly—and, Oh, how sadly!—while the tears trickled faster and faster down her cheeks.

"Oh, my mother!" she murmured to herself; "you whom I never knew—you who were snatched away from us long ere we had intelligence to appreciate your loss!—you who must be a saint in heaven!—look down and compassionate your poor orphans who have already commenced their hard struggle with the world!"

Christina's bosom was convulsed with sobs, as she thus mentally apostrophized the authoress of her being; and through the tears that dimmed her eyes, she gazed steadfastly upon that long dark tress which she held in her hand. It was one which seemed as if it might have belonged to her own head—of such raven darkness was it, and of such silky fineness. She replaced it in her work-box, carefully enveloped however in a piece of tissue-paper; and then she drew forth a watch from the packet which she had opened. It was a beautiful gold watch, of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, and fitted for a lady. Many, many pounds might have been raised upon it—at least many, many pounds in the estimation of those who were penniless; and Christina was already calculating that the produce of this watch would enable her brother and herself to subsist for many, many weeks—when a compunctious thought smote her, and she laid it down. Then she took up two rings; and these also she contemplated with a deep and mournful interest. One was a wedding-ring—the other, likewise a lady's, of no considerable value, but of exquisite workmanship. Again did the compunctious feeling strike the sensitive girl; and as the tears now rained down her cheeks, she murmured, "No, mother! we will starve—we will perish, sooner than part with these memorials which we possess of you!"

The watch and the two rings were replaced in the packet, which was folded up and carefully tied; and the work-box was locked again. Then Christina went to her own trunk; and selecting her best dress and shawl, she enveloped them in a handkerchief and issued forth from the lodging-house. The poor girl bent her way to the nearest pawnbroker's shop. It was now completely dusk—the gas was lighted inside—the plate and jewellery in the window shone with resplendence. Christina lingered for a few moments at the shop-door: but she had not the courage to enter—and she passed along the street. Again did the tears stream from her eyes at the thought of the distressing position to which her brother and herself were reduced. Then she recollected that he would return presently, fatigued with his walk—hungry too, as he had gone forth; and that there was not a morsel of bread at the lodging for him to eat. She abruptly turned back—wiped the tears from her eyes—and mustering up all her courage, sped in the direction of the pawnbroker's shop. A loutish-looking boy was gazing in at the window, devouring all the fine things with his eyes: but as Miss Ashton approached the door, he suddenly looked round, and with a coarse grin said, "Ah, young o'oman! it's easier to take things there than to git 'em out agin."

It was not that the fellow ill-naturedly intended to wound the poor girl's feelings: but his words had that effect,—piercing indeed like a barbed arrow into her heart; for she was in that desponding, almost wretched state of mind, when any incident of this sort suddenly assumes the aspect of an ominous prediction to be fearfully fulfilled. With almost a preterhuman effort she kept back the tears that were again ready to start forth from her beauteous black eyes; and in a fit of desperation she rushed into the shop.

The pawnbroker, with spectacles upon his nose and pen stuck behind his ear, bent a scrutinising glance upon the young girl, so as to assure himself, as far as such survey would, that she had not stolen the articles she came to pledge:—and then he examined them. She was ready to sink with shame during the process—and all the more so, as in the middle of it a couple of ill-looking half-tipsy women came in, with brazen effrontery in their looks—for *they* were not humiliated at the thought of being seen in such a place. The pawnbroker asked her how much she required upon the articles: but she was so confused that she was unable to utter a word. The man's experience in such matters at once enabled him to detect the difference between shrinking bashfulness and conscious dishonesty: he therefore received the pledges—handed her over thirty shillings, together with a small ticket—and Christina hurried out of the shop, infinitely relieved at escaping from the coarse looks and jeering whispers of the two women.

She purchased provisions, and re-entered the lodging. When her brother returned from his unavailing errand, his eyes instantaneously glanced from the food which was spread upon the table, towards his sister—and he burst into tears. He comprehended in a moment the generosity of her purpose in sending him temporarily out of the way; and he embraced her fervently. But then a painful idea smote him; and through his tears he again glanced—but now with anxious inquiry—towards Christina. She comprehended what he meant, and at once reassured him by explaining what she had done, and that the little memorials which they possessed of their long dead mother had not been touched. They sat down to eat; but it was with no small degree of bitterness that they partook of the food obtained by money raised from such a source.

Christian rose very early on the following morning, and told his sister that he should renew his inquiries after a place, notwithstanding the disappointments he had already experienced. She replied that she also should go about to solicit work, and begged her brother to return in a few hours to escort her for the purpose. He promised that he would; and he sallied forth. Repairing to a neighbouring coffee-house, he carefully inspected the advertising columns of the newspapers; and his eyes settled upon an announcement to the effect that a young man of intelligence, and who wrote a gentlemanly hand, was required by a nobleman as an amanuensis, or private secretary. Application was to be made at a particular address in Piccadilly. Off set Christian in that direction—we cannot exactly say with hope in his heart, because he had already experienced so many disappointments and rebuffs: but at least he was determined not to lose the opportunity for want of following it up. On arriving in Piccadilly and reaching the particular address indicated, he found that it was a jeweller's shop. He thought there must be some mistake: but as the number of the house was precisely that specified in the newspaper advertisement, he resolved to inquire. Entering the shop, he addressed himself to one of the serving-men; and on naming his business, was at once informed that it was the proper place at which to apply in the first instance. Then the shopman gave Christian a card, and recommended him to go at once, as there had already been several applicants for the situation.

The youth felt that the advice given was somewhat cheering, inasmuch as it appeared to promise that he would not be considered too young for the employment which he sought. He looked at the card, and found that it was that of the Duke of Marchmont, whose residence was in Belgrave Square. Christian had never, to his knowledge, heard the name mentioned before; and he was stricken with timidity at the thought of appearing as the candidate for a situation with a nobleman of so lofty a rank: but he was not to be deterred by any such feeling from making the attempt—and he was soon in Belgrave Square. The Duke of Marchmont was at home; and when Christian mentioned his business, one of the numerous powdered and liveried lacqueys who were lounging in the hall, conducted the youth to a sumptuously furnished apartment, where his Grace, enveloped in a splendid silk morning-gown, was lounging on a sofa, reading the newspapers—for it was yet early in the forenoon.

We must observe that Christian took great care of his clothes: he was neatly dressed—and from the description already given of him, we need scarcely add that he was not merely respectable-looking, but of an unsurpassable gentility. The Duke, slowly turning his head without raising himself up, and lazily depositing the newspaper by his side, surveyed Christian attentively; and then said, "So you have come after the situation of amanuensis?"

"Yes, my lord," was the youth's response: and he trembled with the nervous anxiety of mingled hope and fear.

"First of all," said the Duke, "before we speak another word upon the matter, sit down at the table and give me a specimen of your writing."

His Grace then took up the newspaper again, and continued the reading of an article in the midst of which he had left off. Christian sat down; and now that the Duke's eyes were no longer upon him, he felt much less embarrassed than at first. He took up a pen—opened a book which lay near—and began to copy on a sheet of paper a portion of its contents. His hand trembled as he first took up that pen: but when he thought of all that was at stake—of how much seemed to depend on this initiative test of his capacities—of his beloved sister Christina—and how she had parted with her raiment on the preceding evening—when he thought too of how joyous his heart would be if he were enabled to return and tell her that he had succeeded at length in procuring a situation,—he was suddenly inspired with a fortitude which surprised himself; and his hand trembled no more.

"That's enough, I dare say, for me to judge by," exclaimed the Duke, at the expiration of about five minutes: and Christian hastened to proffer the paper on which he had been writing. "This is excellent!" cried Marchmont: "the very thing! a most gentlemanly hand! I suppose, my lad, you have been well educated?"

Christian replied, with a becoming modesty, that he had certainly been at a good school, and that he hoped he had profited by that opportunity for instructing himself.

"It's the very sort of handwriting that I wanted," proceeded the Duke,—"a gentleman's, and not a clerk's. I have had three or four applications this morning—and none would suit. There was one fellow who covered a sheet of paper with as many flourishes as a writing-master—so that my letters would have had the air of so many tradesmen's circulars. You see, young man, I have a great number of letters of various sorts to answer; and as I dislike the trouble of it, my correspondence gets confoundedly into arrear. So I have resolved to take an amanuensis, who will sometimes write to my dictation, and at others make out a good letter from the passing hints I may give him, and from the nature of the correspondence which will in itself be suggestive of the proper response. Now, do you think you can manage this?"

"I should not hesitate, my lord, to undertake it with confidence," answered Christian, hope rising still higher in his soul. "But if your Grace would give me some letter to put my capacity to a farther test——"

"No, no—I don't think it is necessary," interrupted the Duke. "You are well spoken, and genteel—which last is another great recommendation in your favour. I think that I may safely give you a trial. The terms I propose are fifty guineas a-year; and as you will live in the house, you will of course have nothing to find except your clothes."

"Live in the house, my lord," murmured Christian, hope sinking again to the very bottom of his heart, where it became well nigh extinguished: for the thought of separating from Christina was not to be endured.

"Oh, yes," said the Duke, carelessly; "you must live in the house, so that you may always be at hand: because it is not to be supposed that I can ever be ready at stated hours to attend to my correspondence."

"My lord, I am exceedingly sorry——I deeply regret——the situation would have pleased me so——but, but——" and the tears came into the poor youth's eyes.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Marchmont sharply. "If it don't suit you, you can retire—and there's an end of the business."

"Oh, my lord, it suits me—it would be the saving of me!" exclaimed Christian, with much feeling. "But I have a sister dependent on me—we are orphans—I could not separate from her——"

"A sister?" observed the Duke: and it immediately struck him that if she were as beautiful as Christian himself was handsome, he should have no objection to become acquainted with her. "And pray how old is your sister?"

"My own age, my lord: we are twins."

"Twins, eh?" ejaculated Marchmont, more and more interested: for now he felt convinced that there *must* be a great similitude between the brother and sister, and therefore no doubt remained as to the beauty of the latter. "And pray, how old are you?"

"Seventeen and a half, my lord," replied Christian.

"And what is your name?" inquired Marchmont.

"Christian Ashton," was the response.

The Duke was somewhat struck by the name: he thought he had heard it before: he reflected for a few moments—and all of a sudden it occurred to him that Lord Octavian Meredith had mentioned the name of Ashton as that of the beautiful creature for whom he had fought the duel with Mr. Stanhope. But the Duke did not suffer Christian to perceive that he was in any way struck by the name; and after a pause, he quietly asked, "Where do you live?"

The youth named the address in Park Street, Camden Town; and Marchmont recollected that it was not the same mentioned to him by Lord Octavian as that where his Grace was to call in the event of Meredith succumbing in the duel. But all in a moment another thought flashed to Marchmont's mind. Octavian had represented his "fair unknown" as having been seen walking with a youth whom by the striking likeness he knew to be her brother. Putting two and two together, the Duke, who was cunning enough in such matters, began to surmise that Miss Ashton must have been Octavian's "fair unknown." But still there was the discrepancy in regard to the address; and this was to be cleared up, in order to prove that Christian's sister was really the same Miss Ashton who had caused the duel, and whose identity with the "fair unknown" the Duke more than half suspected.

"Have you lived long in Park Street, Camden Town?" he inquired, as if in a careless manner.

"Between nine and ten weeks, my lord. Previously to our removal thither," continued Christian, ingenuously giving his explanations with all becoming candour and frankness, "we dwelt in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square."

The Duke's uncertainty was now completely dissipated; and his mind was made up to take Christian into his service.

"Well, my lad," he said, "I should much rather that you would come and live in the house: but if you object, it shall not stand as a barrier in the way of an arrangement. You appear to suit me in every other respect; and therefore it is a bargain. Go and consult your sister: but I think that if you were wise, you would make up your mind to dwell beneath my roof, and your sister could occupy a lodging somewhere in the neighbourhood—so that you might often be with her when not engaged in writing. I don't suppose you will have more than a couple of hours' work every day; and you would therefore have ample time to pass with your sister. But take your choice—return to me to-morrow morning at this same hour—and let me know your decision. The place is your's, whichsoever way it may be: I promise you that much."

Christian issued forth from the presence of the Duke of Marchmont. He could scarcely restrain his joy as he crossed the spacious landing ornamented with vases and sculptures—as he descended the superb marble staircase—as he traversed the hall where the livery-servants were lounging about, and where an old porter of corpulent form and jolly countenance, sat in his great leathern chair, reading a newspaper. But when Christian had cleared the threshold of the palatial portals, his heart swelled with such exultation that tears of bliss started from his eyes. He was happy: never had he felt so happy! It was a species of intoxication of the brain that he experienced. To think that when his hopes were at the very lowest, he should thus have procured a situation that was higher than his most ambitious soarings! He sped through the square—he ran along the streets—he leaped into the first omnibus that would take him near to his destination. It seemed as if no journey was ever so long—he was so anxious to reach his humble home, and impart the joyous intelligence to his dearly beloved twin-sister!

But before Christian reaches the lodging, let us see what Christina herself has been doing in the interval. Her brother had gone out early, as the reader will recollect—and had promised to return in a few hours to escort his sister in her search for needlework. Christina hastened to put their two little chambers into becoming order; and when she had done this, she descended to the landlady's own parlour, and began to consult her in respect to her position. Mrs. Giles was a good-natured woman, kind-hearted and benevolent—and considerably different from her acquaintance, Mrs. Macaulay. She had suspected for some little time past that the twins were not very comfortable in their circumstances; and she often had it on the tip of her tongue to speak some sympathising words, or to proffer advice if she were enabled to afford any. But Christian and Christina had a certain pride of their own—a very natural one too—which prompted them to keep up their respectability as well as they could in the eyes of their landlady; and though they were most courteous and affable towards her, they had never thrown themselves in the way of any lengthy discourse. Now however Christina had laid aside all that sense of shame which had hitherto kept her silent: she frankly told Mrs. Giles how her brother and herself were situated—and expressed her fears that they must surrender up their present lodging and betake themselves to a still cheaper one.

"My dear young lady," answered Mrs. Giles, "you need not vex and annoy yourself about your rent. Remain here as long as you like, and pay me when you can."

Christina expressed her deep gratitude to the worthy woman—but declared that neither she nor her brother would wilfully contract a debt which they had no immediate prospect of liquidating.

"I am not at all surprised," said the landlady, "that both yourself and your brother have failed in procuring such employments as you have sought. Master Ashton is too genteel to go and apply for a clerk's place,—because, being so young, he could only expect small remuneration, and an employer would fancy that he could not make a hard-working drudge of such an elegant gentlemanly young man who carries his fine spirit in his very countenance. As for needlework, my dear Miss Ashton, there are so many thousands and thousands of poor creatures scrambling to get whatever there is to do in that way, that a great many must of course go without."

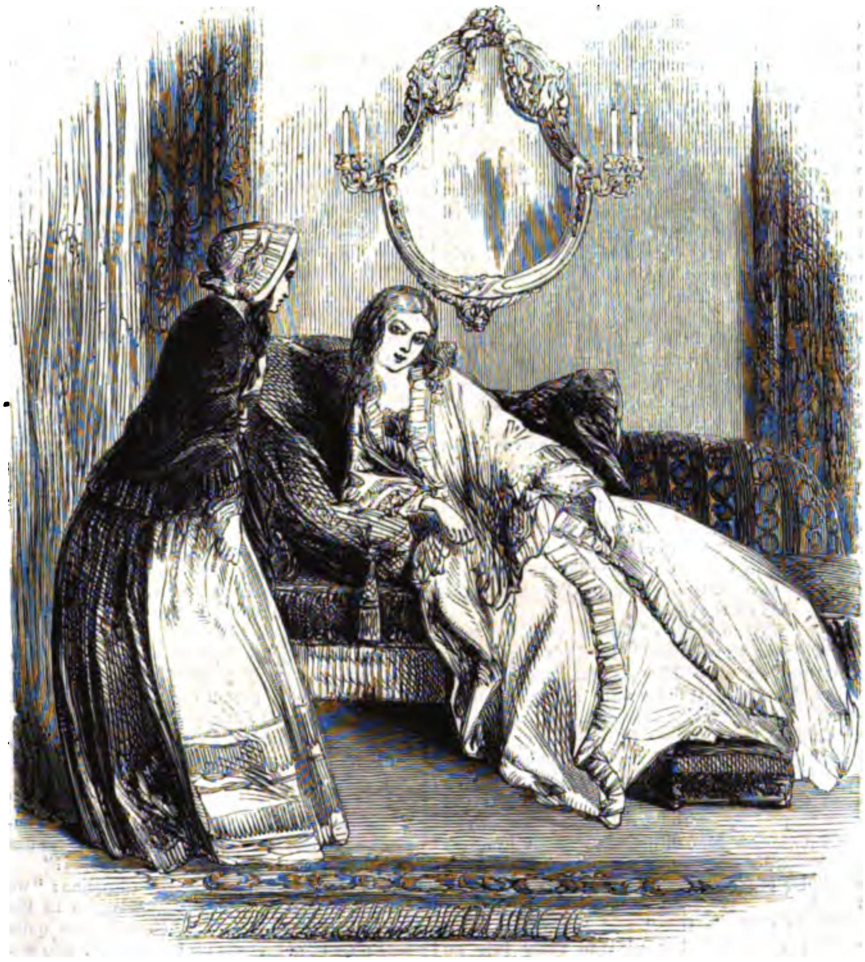
"Yes—I feel that it is so," answered Christina, with a profound sigh. "I would do anything," she added, bursting into tears, "to earn bread for myself and my brother. I had intended to go again into the City presently, and inquire at some of the clothing marts for work: but a thought just now struck me—and I made up my mind to consult you on the subject. Do you think that I could possibly procure the situation of companion to some lady—or even the situation of maid——anything, in short, that would relieve my mind from the dreadful anxiety which now fills it. It would be hard——Oh! very hard to separate from my brother. I used to feel how hard it was when, as boy and girl, we parted to go to our respective schools after the holidays. But it would be harder still to see that poor brother of mine want bread;—and indeed I cannot bear the thought that day after day he runs about in weariness, seeking for employment—humbling himself to purse-proud men, and meeting rebuffs which cut him to the very soul and pierce mine also!"

Christina wept:—indeed for a few minutes she sobbed convulsively,—Mrs. Giles saying all she possibly could to cheer and console her.

"Ah! now I think of it," suddenly exclaimed the worthy woman, with joy upon her countenance, "I do really believe there is an opening for you!"

The young girl hastily wiped away her tears, and listened with eager suspense.

"My daughter," continued Mrs. Giles, "is housemaid in a nobleman's family close by here, in the Regent's Park. Jessy—that's my daughter's name—and a good girl she is too, though I say it—was here last evening; and she told me that her ladyship wanted a companion—some nice genteel young person——in a word, I am sure, Miss Ashton, that you would suit in every particular



And her ladyship is so amiable, and good, and kind—and his lordship is such a nice man! They have not long been married——"

"Oh, if it were possible," exclaimed Christina, joy expanding in her heart, "that I could obtain such a situation!"

"I really think you will obtain it, Miss," answered the landlady: "and though I should be sorry to lose you as a lodger, I should nevertheless be well pleased to know that you were comfortably situated. You had better go about it at once."

"I will," cried the young girl: "and a thousand thanks to you for the intelligence you have given me and the kind wishes you have expressed."

Christina hastened up to her own chamber—put on the best apparel which she could command—and descended to Mrs. Giles's room again, to inquire the address to which she was to proceed. The landlady had already written it down for her; and Christina, with renewed thanks, issued forth from the house. As she entered the Regent's Park, she suddenly recollected the insulting conduct she had experienced on a former occasion; and she almost repented that she had not awaited her brother's return to escort her. But then, what happiness would it be for her if, when he came back to the lodging, she should be enabled to give him the assurance that thenceforth they would both have bread! The idea of separation was the only drawback to the happiness which Christina felt she should experience if her present mission proved successful: but still she argued with herself that when persons are enmeshed in difficulties, it is almost invariably necessary to make certain sacrifices in order to escape from them. Thus reflecting, she continued her way—she crossed the Regent's Park without experiencing any fresh insult—and she at length knocked at the door of a house, of very genteel appearance, though not of very spacious dimensions.

To her inquiry whether Lady Octavian Meredith was at home and could be seen at such an early hour in the forenoon, she received an affirmative response—and was at once conducted to a parlour where Zoe, in a morning *deshabillée*, was seated upon a sofa. Christina was already prepossessed, by what Mrs. Giles had said, in favour of Lady Octavian Meredith: but her good opinion was enhanced at the very first glance which she flung upon Mr. Armytage's daughter. It was not so much that the exquisite beauty of Zoe interested the young girl, as that the goodness and sweetness depicted on Lady Octavian Meredith's lovely countenance, were well calculated to inspire confidence and hope. The dark velvet covering of the sofa threw out Zoe's form in admirable relief,—arrayed as it was in a light morning garb: her hair, without any ornament, showered in ringlets upon her shoulders; and it was with a gracious encouraging smile that Zoe, on learning Christina's business, bade her sit down.

Lady Octavian Meredith herself was struck with the extraordinary beauty of Christina—a beauty which was in such perfect contrast with her own, —inasmuch as Miss Ashton's hair and eyes were dark, while those of her ladyship were of a light angelic style. But it would have been difficult for an observer to decide which was the more beautiful of the two—although perhaps Christina might have carried off the palm.

There was no shade of jealousy—no, not even the slightest tinge thereof, in Zoe's disposition: and therefore when Miss Ashton announced the object of her visit, it did not for a single moment occur to Lady Octavian Meredith that there might possibly be some danger in introducing so transcendingly beautiful a creature into the house. Besides, in the same way that Christina was interested by Zoe's appearance—so was the latter at once prepossessed with regard to the former; and Lady Octavian Meredith found herself inwardly expressing the hope that the applicant would prove a suitable candidate for the position she had come to seek.

"It is perfectly true," said Zoe, in her sweet musical voice, "that I wish to enter into an engagement with a young lady who will live with me as a friend:"—for she could not utter the word *companion*, which in that particular sense might convey the offensive significancy of a toady. "Lord Octavian Meredith is, as a matter of course, frequently out: it is natural that he should seek those companions with whom his position enables him to associate; and I occasionally feel myself somewhat dull and lonely. You are aware that in what is called the fashionable world, visits are not paid until late in the afternoon, and then they are mere flying ones—and I am fain to confess, that the conversation is usually frivolous and unsatisfactory. Thus I am many hours alone; and I cannot always while away the time with my books, my music, or my work. Therefore I seek the friendship of a young lady of amiable manners, of intellectual acquirements, and of certain accomplishments. She may rely upon kind treatment: she shall never find herself in a false position—she shall be as one of the family—subject to no restraint nor coercion—and to be regarded as on a perfect equality with myself. I have been thus candid and frank—thus lengthy likewise in my explanations, so that you may at once understand, Miss Ashton, my requirement and all its circumstances."

The reader must bear in mind that Zoe was utterly ignorant of the acquaintance of her husband with Christina—equally unaware of the adventure in the Park nine weeks back—equally unaware also of the duel which had followed. On the other hand, Christina was as completely ignorant that accident had brought her to the house belonging to him whom she only knew as Mr. Percival—and of course equally ignorant that she was in the presence of that individual's wife.

"I thank your ladyship," answered Miss Ashton, "for the explanations you have given me; and I fully appreciate the delicate terms in which they have been conveyed. With equal frankness will I place before your ladyship the humble claims which I have to submit to your notice. I was well educated, and was instructed in some few accomplishments—though I am not vain enough to say that I possess any. I am fond of music—I love drawing in water colours or with pencil—I am equally attached to a certain style of reading—chiefly history, biography, books of travel, and such instructive works. I have every disposition to render myself agreeable and useful; and I may confidently add that I shall repay with gratitude whatsoever kindness is shown me. My position is somewhat a painful one. I have a twin-brother—and we are orphans. We are likewise friendless. A recent calamity has deprived us of the resources which we previously possessed—I allude to the sudden flight of a person who lived on the other side of the Regent's Park——"

"Do you mean Mr. Preston?" inquired Zoe, with some degree of surprise.

"The same, my lady," answered Christina.

"And it was my own father Mr. Armytage," rejoined Zoe, "who first discovered that man's delinquencies—and I regret to say that he too has suffered by them. Is he a relation of yours?"

"Oh, no, my lady!" responded Christina: "we have not to our knowledge any relations in the world. Our parents died when we were quite young: we were brought up by an uncle, who was a widower; and to him were we indebted for the good education we received. He died suddenly; and immediately after the funeral, Mr. Preston announced himself to us as the person to whom we had thenceforth to look for supplies of money. It was by his desire that we came up to London; and he regularly furnished us with an income until the period of his flight. Since then we have experienced troubles and afflictions——"

Here Christina stopped short and burst into tears. Lady Octavian Meredith was much affected by the orphan girl's narrative; and she spoke in a kind soothing manner. Christina, when again able to speak, informed her ladyship that she and her brother had resided six months at Mrs. Macaulay's, and upwards of two months at Mrs. Giles's, —both of whom could speak as to their characters and conduct.

"Mrs. Giles is a most respectable woman," observed Zoe; "and I am very certain that she would not recommend you to me unless perfectly assured that there was propriety in so doing. Forgive me if for a moment I have alluded to such matters as recommendations and so forth——"

"It is necessary, my lady—and it is better," replied Christina. "If I have the good fortune to please your ladyship, I should wish to enter your house in the fullest confidence that you are satisfied with me.'

"I am already satisfied, from everything which you have told me," rejoined Lady Octavian Meredith; "and I will request my husband to use his interest to procure some suitable situation for your brother. I can understand, from all you have said, that it would be painful for you to separate from that brother; but you have my free permission to receive him as often as he may choose to call upon you—the oftener the better: for it will do me good to behold you happy and contented. I am already much interested in you, Miss Ashton; and I am grateful that Mrs. Giles should have counselled you to visit my house to-day."

Christina expressed her warmest thanks for all these kind assurances; and Lady Octavian Meredith proceeded, in the most delicate and considerate manner, to intimate the terms which she proposed to offer any young lady whom she might select as her friend. In a word, the compact was formed; and Christina promised to remove to her ladyship's house on the morrow.

"I shall take the liberty of requesting Mrs. Giles," said Christina, when rising to depart, "to call upon your ladyship in the course of the day, that she may confirm, so far as she knows me, the representations that I have made; and as she is acquainted with my former landlady, she can give your ladyship such assurances as Mrs. Macaulay herself would impart if referred to."

"It is by no means necessary," answered Zoe: "but inasmuch as I see that it will satisfy you, Miss Ashton, you can bid Mrs. Giles call upon me presently."

Zoe rose from her seat, and extended her hand with sweetest affability to Christina—who, with renewed thanks and with joy in her heart, took her leave. Thus, while Christina was retracing her way across the Regent's Park — Christian, having alighted from the omnibus, was speeding along Albany Street, also in a homeward direction. Neither had the faintest suspicion of the good fortune which had suddenly smiled upon the other: each heart was full of joy on the other's account. But that of Christina was somewhat shaded, because in *her* case, it was settled that she must separate from her brother; whereas in Christian's case it had been left by the Duke of Marchmont to his own option as to whether he should live at the mansion in Belgrave Square, or still continue to reside with his sister.

Christina reached the lodging first, and at once informed Mrs. Giles of the success of her visit to Lady Octavian Meredith. She likewise requested the worthy woman to call upon her ladyship in the course of the day.

"That I shall do with pleasure," was the response cheerfully given: "indeed I shall set off at once—and you may depend upon it, my dear young lady, I shall say everything in your favour which you so fully deserve."

Christina hastened up-stairs—and scarcely had she put off her walking apparel, when Christian came rushing up as if he were wild. He burst into the room; and folding his sister in a warm embrace, cried, "Joy, joy, darling Christina! I have succeeded at length."

"And I too, my beloved brother, have succeeded in something," she responded, with an almost equal exultation.

Christian contemplated her with surprise; and mutual explanations were speedily given. But Christian was now saddened at the idea of separating from his sister.

"His Grace," he said mournfully, "left it to me to decide whether I would live at his mansion, or continue to dwell with you; and I had arranged in my mind such a nice little plan of removing into the neighbourhood of Belgrave Square, so that we might be together——"

"But my dear brother," interrupted Christina, though with tears in her eyes, "we must resign ourselves to this separation. From what you have told me, the Duke of Marchmont offers you fifty guineas a-year—a most liberal sum if you dwell in his mansion—but it would instantly become a small one if you resided in lodgings and had to support me. Lady Octavian Meredith offers me sixty guineas a-year; and I am to dwell with her. We can both save considerably from our incomes; and perhaps, my dear brother, in the course of time our economies will enable us to reside together again. Besides, Lady Octavian assures me that the oftener you call upon me the better she shall be pleased; and the Duke of Marchmont has informed you that you will have plenty of time at your own disposal. We may see each other daily, or nearly every day: we may walk out together —— Oh! indeed, dear Christian, we shall make ourselves happy! And remember what a change these few brief hours have suddenly worked for us. Last night we ate the bread of bitterness: to-day we shall eat the bread of happiness. This morning we rose in mournfulness from our respective beds: to-night we shall lay ourselves upon our pillows with hope, consolation, and thankfulness in our hearts. We shall close our eyes in slumber without the dread of the morrow's awakening."

Christian could offer no remonstrances against this reasoning on his sister's part; and the arrangements were therefore to the effect that he should return in the course of the day to the Duke of Marchmont to state the decision to which he had come—so that on the morrow he might remove to his Grace's mansion, at the same time that his sister took up her residence with Lady Octavian Meredith.

In the course of a couple of hours Mrs. Giles returned from her visit to Zoe; and she now learnt the good fortune which had simultaneously overtaken Christian. She congratulated the twins with the most genuine sincerity; and placing an envelope in Christina's hand, said, "Lady Octavian Meredith is already so deeply interested in you, and is so fearful of losing you, that she has desired me to tender you this as a ratification of the compact."

Mrs. Giles then hastened from the room; and Christina, on opening the envelope, found that it contained a bank-note for twenty pounds. The orphans were deeply touched by this proof of Lady Octavian's generosity and kindness—and all the more so on account of the delicate manner in which the succour was conveyed.

Christian hastened off again to the Duke of Marchmont's residence; and when it was dusk, Christina went forth to redeem her wearing apparel from the pawnbroker's. With very different feelings from those which she had experienced on the previous evening, was it that she now entered the place; and she returned with a light heart to the lodging, to prepare a comfortable meal against her brother's re-appearance. And it *was* the bread of happiness which the twins ate that night—scarcely saddened by the idea of separation, because they felt it was for their mutual good.

But when the morrow came and the hour for separation arrived, they wept and renewed again and again the farewell embrace ere they tore themselves asunder.

CHAPTER XIX,

THE BURKER.

The scene which we are about to describe, occurred on the same evening as Christina's visit to the pawnbroker.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that a man of most ill-favoured appearance, emerged from one of the low courts opening from the New Cut, Lambeth; and bent his way in the direction of the maze of densely populated streets and alleys which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. This man was about forty years of age; and it would be impossible to conceive a human exterior so repulsive, or so fearfully calculated to make the blood of a beholder curdle in the veins. There are some physiognomies which impress one with a capacity for particular sorts of mischief; there are features, for instance, which indicate low cunning—others denote violent passions—and there are others which reveal an instinctive thirst for blood. But all the most terrible attributes of the human mind were concentrated in the expression of that man's countenance. He had a small snub nose, which appeared to have been stuck on to his face as if it were an afterthought of nature: his mouth was large, and was furnished with a set of sharp pointed shark-like teeth, which being naturally white, and remaining so in defiance of neglect, glittered horribly between his coarse thick lips. His eyes were of the dark colour and expression of a reptile's; and the brows, by being traced irregularly—or else being brought down by an habitual lowering regard—added to the shuddering sensation produced by a look from those horrible eyes. His hair—of a light brown, and already turning gray—was completely matted: his whiskers, of a darker colour, were equally ragged and unkempt. He was dressed in a loose drab upper garment that appeared to be a coachman's great-coat with a portion of the skirts cut off. A dirty cotton handkerchief was tied negligently about his neck; and his trousers, of a dingy gray, hung loose as if he wore no braces. His hands were thrust into the pockets on the outer side of the coat, and under one arm he held a short stick, which however might be more aptly denominated a club. From beneath the leathern front of his well-worn cap, his looks were flung hastily around when he emerged from the court, as if his conscience were not altogether so clear as to place his personal freedom beyond the possibility of inconvenient molestation.

Continuing his way, and passing rapidly through several streets—evidently with a settled purpose in view—he at length relaxed his pace near a house in the midst of that maze of lanes, alleys, and courts to which we have already alluded. It was a house that had a small dissenting chapel on one side, and a beer-shop on the other; and it must be observed that next to the chapel there was a narrow alley with a low arched entrance. The house to which we are particularly alluding, and which stood between the chapel and the beer-shop, was a small one—for it was a poor street; but there was nothing in its exterior to detract from its air of humble respectability. A small brass-plate on the front door, indicated that it was occupied by a person named John Smedley, whose calling was that of gold-beater. This was farther illustrated by a gilt arm, the fist clutching a hammer, which appeared over the ground-floor window. That window had green blinds; and if a passer-by peeped over them, he would look into a little parlour that was furnished neatly enough. The two windows of the first floor front had dark moreen curtains: for this floor was let to a lodger. When unoccupied, a neatly written card, conveying the intimation of "Lodgings to let," would be seen in the lower window: but the ticket was not there now, inasmuch as the apartments referred to had a tenant.

Mr. and Mrs. Smedley had the reputation in the neighbourhood of being respectable people enough,—although whispering rumour declared that the wife was somewhat attached to strong waters; but on the other hand, the husband was regular in his attendance at the dissenting chapel next door,—so that the minister regarded him as one of his "choicest and most savoury vessels." He was a man of about eight-and-thirty—with a mean insignificant countenance, in the expression of which it was difficult to find an index of his real character or disposition. A very close observer, if experienced in reading the human heart, would have had some misgivings relative to the sincerity of Mr. Smedley's religious devotion, and might perhaps have caught the glitter of hypocritical cunning underneath the gloss of sanctimoniousness which he habitually wore. His wife was a tall and rather well-made woman, with large features, and a look that indicated decision of character. She had dark hair and eyes, and somewhat a gipsy cast of countenance,—which was enhanced by her olive complexion. She generally wore her hair floating over her shoulders; and though there was a certain bold hardihood in her looks, yet the neighbours were acquainted with nothing prejudicial to her reputation as a wife. She was three or four years younger than her husband, but kept him under the completest control.

The Smedleys had no children: but they had a companion and an assistant in the person of Mrs. Smedley's mother. She was a woman of about sixty, with the same style of features as her daughter, though more angular and prominent with the effects of age; and there was certainly something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in her looks. She aided her daughter in the household work, and especially attended upon the lodger who occupied the apartments on the first floor. It was rumoured that Mrs. Webber—for that was the old woman's name—possessed some little means of her own; and this opinion appeared to be confirmed from the fact that the Smedleys were tolerably comfortable in their circumstances, and lived in a better style than either the gold-beating avocation or that of letting a portion of their house to a lodger, could possibly warrant. Indeed, John Smedley did not appear to be overburdened with work: for he was often sauntering about the neighbourhood, either for his recreation or else to distribute tracts amongst those whom he denominated his "benighted brethren and sisters." As for Mrs. Smedley and the mother they seldom stirred out of the house, except on a Sunday, when they sometimes accompanied the gold-beater to chapel: but they were not by any means so regular in their attendance as he himself was.

The ill-favoured man whom we introduced at the beginning of this chapter, was named Barnes—but was more familiarly called Barney by his intimates; and sometimes he was spoken of, though never addressed to his face, as Barney the Burker;—it having been suspected that some years previously to the time of which we are writing, he had been connected with the diabolical gang whose wholesale murders produced consternation throughout the country. But as we have just hinted, it was by no means safe to throw out the imputation to Barnes's face: for the savage vindictiveness of his character and his implacable ferocity would have at once prompted him to inflict a terrible chastisement on whomsoever he might regard as giving him offence.

Relaxing his pace, as we have said, when he drew near the gold-beater's house, he flung his looks hastily around,—evidently to assure himself that he was not observed; and then he made a sudden dive under the low arch which led into the alley by the side of the chapel. This alley had an opening at the farther extremity, communicating with a small vacant space behind the chapel, and which was separated by a low wall from the yard at the rear of the Smedleys' house. Over this wall Barney the Burker at once clambered; and alighting in the yard, he without ceremony entered the dwelling by the back door. Though it was dark within, he evidently knew the premises well: for he immediately began to descend a flight of steps—and thus reached an underground place, which being behind the kitchen, might be described as the scullery. Here a light burnt upon a small deal table, at which the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber were seated, with bottles and glasses before them. A massive door on one side communicated with a cellar; and another door led into the front kitchen.

It may possibly be wondered wherefore the Smedleys and the old woman were enjoying themselves on the present occasion in so damp, gloomy, and dungeon-like a place as the scullery, where there was no grate, and consequently no fire—and this too being the cold winter season. But they had business of a particular nature to discuss, and a particular visitor to receive. They did not therefore choose to sit in the parlour, lest passers-by should peep in through the crevices of the shutters, or stand to listen to what was being said; and as there was an iron grating over the front kitchen window, down which anybody might look if lights were burning there, they had similar reasons for avoiding that place. There were certainly other rooms in which they might have met,—such for instance as the back parlour on the ground-floor, which served as John Smedley's workshop when he had any work to do: but then there was the fear of the lodger overhearing anything that was said—and thus was it that the scullery served as the most convenient part of the house for the business that was in hand. What this business was will soon transpire: but the reader has already seen that Barney the Burker was the visitor who was expected.

He made his appearance with the air of one who was no stranger—but on the contrary, was on exceedingly good terms with the gold-beater and the two women. Just nodding familiarly to them all three, he took a seat—dropped his club on one side, and his cap on the other—and then proceeded to help himself to a stiff glass of gin-and-water.

"Well, this *is* a night for blue ruin, hot and strong," he said, grinning so as to display his shark-like teeth, and speaking in a voice that was of habitual hoarseness. "It's uncommon cold—and I wonder you ain't quaking all over with the shivers in this here well of a place."

"You see, my good fellow," replied Smedley, "that it answers very well as a council-room——"

"Come, let's to business," interrupted Mrs. Smedley sharply, as she bent a peremptory look upon her husband to silence him: for he was fond of talking, but she was not fond of listening to him.

"My dear Bab, don't be so fast upon one," rejoined Smedley, in a deprecating manner: and here we may observe that his wife's name was Barbara, for which Bab was used as a diminutive.

"Well, what's in the wind now?" asked the Burker. "I got your message, Jack," he continued, thus addressing Smedley, "which you sent by Tim Scott this arternoon——"

"Ah, Tim Scott is a sharp lad!" interjected the old woman; "and I think he's indebted to you, Barney, for his edication."

"Well, ma'am," replied the Burker, "I certainly have done summut in that way for Tim Scott. But he don't come up to his big brother Bill in artfulness—not by no manner of means. Howsomever, he'll get on in time; and *then* let me tell yer there won't be two such rare fellers in all London as them Scotts—chaps arter my own heart!"

"To be sure," said Mrs. Smedley, with an approving look. "You require such instruments."

"You're right enow there," exclaimed the Burker, with a terrible imprecation. "To get a livin' now-a-days, a man ought to have a dozen hands and arms, and them too always at work: and he ought to have a dozen pair of eyes, to see which way the wind blows——aye, by jingo! and a dozen pair of legs too, to run away from them blue-bottle rascals, or the sneaking detectives, when there's a hue and cry arter him. I tell yer what it is,—them as has the power is making the country one that ain't fit to live in, what with their new-fangled laws and so on. Why, if I only stand a minute or two in the street, just to take a look at what is going on, up comes a blue-bottle and stares at me fust of all as if there was threats of treadmills in his eyes; and then he bids me move off just as if his tongue had borrowed its tones from the knocker of Newgate. But if I happen to look raythег hard at some swell cove passing along, and chance to foller in the same direction—*then*, by jingo! I'd better cut and run for it; or else up afore the beak—no one to speak to my character—all in wain to say I'm a honest 'ard-working man—but off to the stone jug, and six weeks on the everlasting staircase as a rogue and wagabone."

Mr. Barney the Burker's language increased in vehemence and bitterness as he thus enumerated his wrongs; and when he had finished, he struck the table so violently with his fist that the bottles, jugs, and glasses appeared as if they were dancing a reel. Then, after a pause—during which the injured man looked slowly round upon his listeners to ascertain the effect which his words had produced—he added doggedly, "And all that's called justice!"

"I'm afraid times have been as bad with you lately," said Mrs. Smedley, "as they have with us. For a matter of ten months we had no lodger——"

"Till this present one come," observed the Burker. "Well, and what do you make out of him?—for I suppose it's about *that* you sent up the message to me to-day by young Tim Scott."

"Right enough, Barney," exclaimed Smedley. "He's a queer file, that old fellow up-stairs——"

"Old indeed!" said Mrs. Webber, who was herself sixty—and therefore she spoke with some degree of indignation: "he is not more than fifty—and I am sure I call that quite young!"

"Nonsense, mother!" interposed Bab Smedley, with her usual sharpness. "Don't waste time about such silly trifles:" then lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, she said to the Burker, "We mean to do it."

"And right enow too!" he answered; "if so be you've made sure it's worth while."

"Trust us for that," responded Bab. "My mother, though she is so silly in some respects, is precious sharp in others; and she has wormed herself into the lodger's good graces——"

"What's his name again?" inquired Barney.

"Smith," responded Bab: "but of course we knew very well, the moment he came to the house, that it wasn't his right name. He looked so wild and frightened—and seemed glad to be able to hide himself any where; and when I had showed him the lodgings, told him what the price was, and asked for a reference, he said he couldn't give any, but he would pay his rent in advance. And then I asked him his name; and he seemed to hesitate for a minute whether he should call himself Brown, Jones, Thompson, or Smith."

"And he has never once been out since he came here," observed Smedley, taking up the tale: "never once crossed the threshold of the front door."

has been all of a nervous fidget the
aid Mrs. Webber. "Ah! and how
too! I shouldn't have thought that a matter of a little more than two months could have made such a change in a human being. But that's why you, Jack," she added, turning to her son-in-law, "call him old. His face is as thin and as pale as a ghost's: he wasn't very fat when he first came—but he has so shrunk away that his clothes hang on him just as if they were never made for him at all."

"But has he got the ready?" demanded Barney: "for that's the principal thing we have got to look at."

"We know he has got *some* money," responded Bab; "and I will tell you how we found it out. It was only the first thing this morning that we discovered it—but we all along suspected that he had a hoard, though he did come without anything but a small carpet-bag——"

"Well, but about the money?" asked the Burker, mixing himself another glass of hot spirits-and-water.

"Why, you see," resumed Bab, "my mother went up as usual this morning to ask him about his dinner; and she gave him his weekly bill to pay. So——"

"Let *me* tell the story, Bab," interrupted the old woman. "You must know, Barney, that he's always in a constant tremble; and every time the door is opened, he looks as frightened as if he expected to see the constables walk in. Well, when I gave him his bill, he put his hand into his pocket; and in his agitation, instead of one purse, he drew out two. Then he got terribly confused, and shoved one of the purses back again—but not before I had time to see that it was well filled with gold at one end—and I rather think, but of course I can't be sure, with bank-notes at the other. He got into conversation, and talked more familiar than he had ever done before;—telling me that he had a deal of trouble on his mind—that he didn't think he should get over it—and then he stopped short, looked very hard at me, and seemed as if he was sorry for letting out so much as he had done. I told him I thought he was ill and wanted the doctor: but I only said *that* just to try and draw him out farther—for I can tell easy enough he *has* something on his mind."

"I shouldn't wonder," observed Barney, "if he has run away from his place of employment, or summut of that sort—perhaps bolted off with the contents of the cash-box. But go on, Mrs. Webber."

"Well," continued the old woman, "Mr. Smith said he didn't want no doctor—he wouldn't see any one—but he thought he should go on the Continent for change of air——"

"He won't, though!" said the Burker, with a look of savage ferocity, "if he has got all that gold in his purse. I'm rayther hard up just at this moment——All my togs, you see, is in Queer Street:"—and he looked slowly down at his coarse sordid apparel.

"Now you know as much of him as we do," remarked Bab Smedley, taking up the thread of the discourse. "So, when mother told us all that—how she had seen the second purse, and how he had hinted about going away—we thought the best thing we could do was to send up to you at once, to tell you to come down this evening and talk over the business. But hark! the up-stairs bell has just rung. Go, mother, quick—and see what he wants!"

Mrs. Webber accordingly bustled up the flight of steps; and having remained absent for five minutes, she re-appeared in the scullery.

"He has made up his mind to leave," she said, in a mysterious whisper, and with still more ominously mysterious looks. "He says he shall go the day after to-morrow—and he asked if I could get somebody who might be trusted to deliver a letter to-morrow——"

"To be sure!" interjected the Burker, with a significant leer. "You said yes, of course?"

"Of course I did!" responded the old woman, almost indignantly, as if she thought that it was an insult to doubt the nature of the reply she had given. "Who knows but that the letter may be a full confession of all the wrong he has done? Perhaps it will be to the people he has robbed: for that he *has* done something of the sort, there can't be the slightest uncertainty."

"Not a bit of it!" said Bab assentingly. "But under present circumstances, we won't do anything to-night: we will wait till to-morrow night. We will read the letter that he wants to send; and maybe it will put him so much in our power that we may be able to make him give up to us all he has got, and so save us the necessity of——you know what:"—and with a darkly sinister look, she glanced down to that part of the floor where the table stood upon a small square piece of drugget.

"Aye," said the Burker, "that's the best plan. If as how we can get it by fair means, well and good: and if not, *then*——"

And lifting up his club, he shook it in a significant manner, his countenance at the same time becoming so diabolically ferocious that even his accomplices in crime could not prevent themselves from shuddering.

"That place has seen one or two go down," observed Jack Smedley; "and may be it will see another before we are much older."

"Yes—you and me have done a little business together in our time, Jack," responded the Burker, as if the antecedents just alluded to were a subject for satisfactory retrospection. "So, may our friendship never be less!"—and with this sentiment, the ruffian nodded to his three accomplices as he raised the glass to his lips.

Good heavens! that the burning alcohol did not choke the miscreant whose tongue had thus impiously perverted the sacred name of *friendship*, and had made it the illustration of his own horrible ideas of fellowship and intimacy. For it was a frightful friendship, if the word can be so used, which linked him with that man and with those two women—a friendship which held them together for the sake of crimes the darkest and the deepest—a terrible intimacy, that was cemented with blood—a fellowship such as that which may be supposed to prevail in pandemonium! Yet those wretches dared look each other in the face; and if three of them shuddered for an instant at the frightful expression which appeared upon the countenance of the fourth, it was not that they were stricken with remorse for past misdeeds, nor with loathing for their associate—but merely that there was an instinctive recoil from a physical ugliness which the reflex of a blood-stained soul at the instant rendered intolerable for any eyes to gaze upon.

"Ah! it's an uncommon convenient place—isn't it, Barney?" observed Jack Smedley, after a pause which had followed the ruffian's sentiment: and the gold-beater, as he thus spoke, looked down upon the drugget as his wife had previously done. "Now, what things do go on in London! Who would suspect——"

"Don't be so silly, Jack," interrupted Bab. "One would think you were going to moralize on the secrets that this house could reveal if it liked. I am always afraid of your tongue——"

"No—you needn't be afeard," interrupted the Burker. "I've knowed Jack Smedley long enough to be sure that he's as downy as the knocker at Newgate, and as safe and tight as the stone-jug itself. Why, let me see—it's a matter of ten year you've been in this house—and you've kept up a good name the whole time."

"It was my dodge, the joining in with the chaps next door!" observed Smedley, with a triumphant grin expanding over his mean-looking countenance: "and let me tell you it's the very best dodge that ever was. They take me for as snivelling and sanctimonious a fellow as themselves."

"To be sure they do!" ejaculated Barney: "and it's a dodge you must keep up. I thought of taking to it myself—only when I peep in the glass, I can't bring my mind to the belief that my looks is the wery best that's suited for putting on a psalm-singing mug. No—that gammon won't do for me: I must stick to what I am. Besides, I shall make summut of them two Scotts soon. But I'll tell you what's wanted."

"And what's that?" inquired Bab Smedley.

"Just to look on such a business as we may perhaps have here to-morrow night," answered the Burker. "There's no use for chaps like the Scotts to think of launching theirselves regular in the profession till they've seen summut of *that* sort. They've got mischief enow in 'em: but they want hardenin'. I understand it right well enow. I know what human nature is. One must be deep in for it, as the sayin' is, before one is at all times ready to go the whole hog. The feelin's must be blunted. Bless you! it's experience as does it all. Why should we be a sitting here and talking so cool over a little affair of this sort, if we hadn't gone through it all afore? To be sure not!"—and as if to clench the argument, the Burker again struck his fist forcibly upon the table.

"Hush!" said Bab Smedley: "not so loud! The old man up-stairs may hear you."

"I suppose he hasn't no suspicion?" asked Barney.

"Not a bit!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber. "He takes me for a nice, good-natured, comfortable matron that tries to do all she can for him; and he thinks that Jack is everything that all the neighbours think him. As for Bab, he one day said to me that my son-in-law ought to be proud of such a fine handsome wife——"

"And so he ought!" exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, flinging upon her husband a look which was as much as to reproach him for not glorifying himself sufficiently in the possession of his spouse.

"Well," said the Burker, "I think I'll be jogging now; and I'll look down to-morrow night, betwixt nine and ten o'clock, to see what has been done or what *is* to be done."

He rose from his seat—drained his glass—nodded familiarly to his three accomplices—stole gently up the flight of steps—and issued forth into the back yard. Having clambered over the wall again, he passed out of the narrow alley, and betook himself towards his own dwelling. This, as already stated, was in a court leading out of the New Cut, which is a large thoroughfare connecting the Waterloo and Blackfriars Roads. Entering a house in this dark court—the atmosphere of which, although in the winter-time, appeared to breathe infection, feculence, and filth—Barney the Burker ascended to a back-room, where two lads were seated at a table playing a game of dominoes. The room was wretchedly furnished, and had two beds spread upon the floor. One was the couch of the Burker: the other was for the use of the brothers.

Bill Scott, the elder, was a most singular-looking being: his ugliness was sufficiently ludicrous to provoke laughter, were it not that the entire expression of his countenance denoted deep innate villany. He was not above eighteen years of age—and his face seemed that of an old man. It was pale and haggard, and even prematurely wrinkled, with the effects of a career of dissipation commenced early and continuously pursued. The very hair had left all the upper part of his forehead; and where it remained on the rest of the head, it was thin and lanky: being too of a light flaxen colour, it might at the first glance be taken for gray—thus adding to the aged appearance of his countenance. He had large goggle eyes—a little snub nose, very much resembling that of his precious preceptor in the ways of wickedness—immense ears—and a mouth of commensurate proportions. In shape he was almost as thin as a skeleton; and his voice, in its weakness, showed that it had suffered beneath the same attenuating influences which had caused the waste and premature decay of his physical being. His brother Tim was about fifteen—of somewhat stunted growth—short, stout, and thickset. He also had light hair, which was as matted as that of the Burker himself. There was a certain degree of similitude between the brothers, with the exception of that air of old age, haggardness, and ghastly pallor which characterised the elder one. In addition to their game of dominoes, they were recreating themselves with a quart of porter—to which however Bill Scott most frequently paid his addresses.

"So you've come in, have you?" said the Burker, as he entered the room. "And now what luck, boys?"

"Here's a reader, with a flimsy and a quid in it," answered the elder brother, producing a pocket-book containing a five pound note and a sovereign: and his horrible countenance lighted up with pride and satisfaction as if he had performed the noblest of exploits.

"Well, that's good, my lad," exclaimed the Burker, his own hideous features expanding into a grin. "Better than you have done for the last six weeks! Now, Tim, what's your luck?"

"A yack, a blue billy, and a wedge-feeder," responded the younger thief, producing the results of his own day's work, in the shape of a watch, a silk handkerchief (with white spots on a blue ground) and a silver spoon.

"Good again!" cried the Burker. "Things is looking up, and we mus'n't say that trade's been dull or business flat to-day. There's been a good deal doing, seemingly, in the prig's market. So we'll have a jolly good blow out for supper. We'll spend this yaller boy," added the villain, taking up the sovereign; "and to-morrow I'll change the finnip"—meaning the bank-note—"and spout the yack and the feeder. As for the fogle"—thus illustrating the handkerchief—"you two shall play a game of dominoes for it, and the winner shall have it."

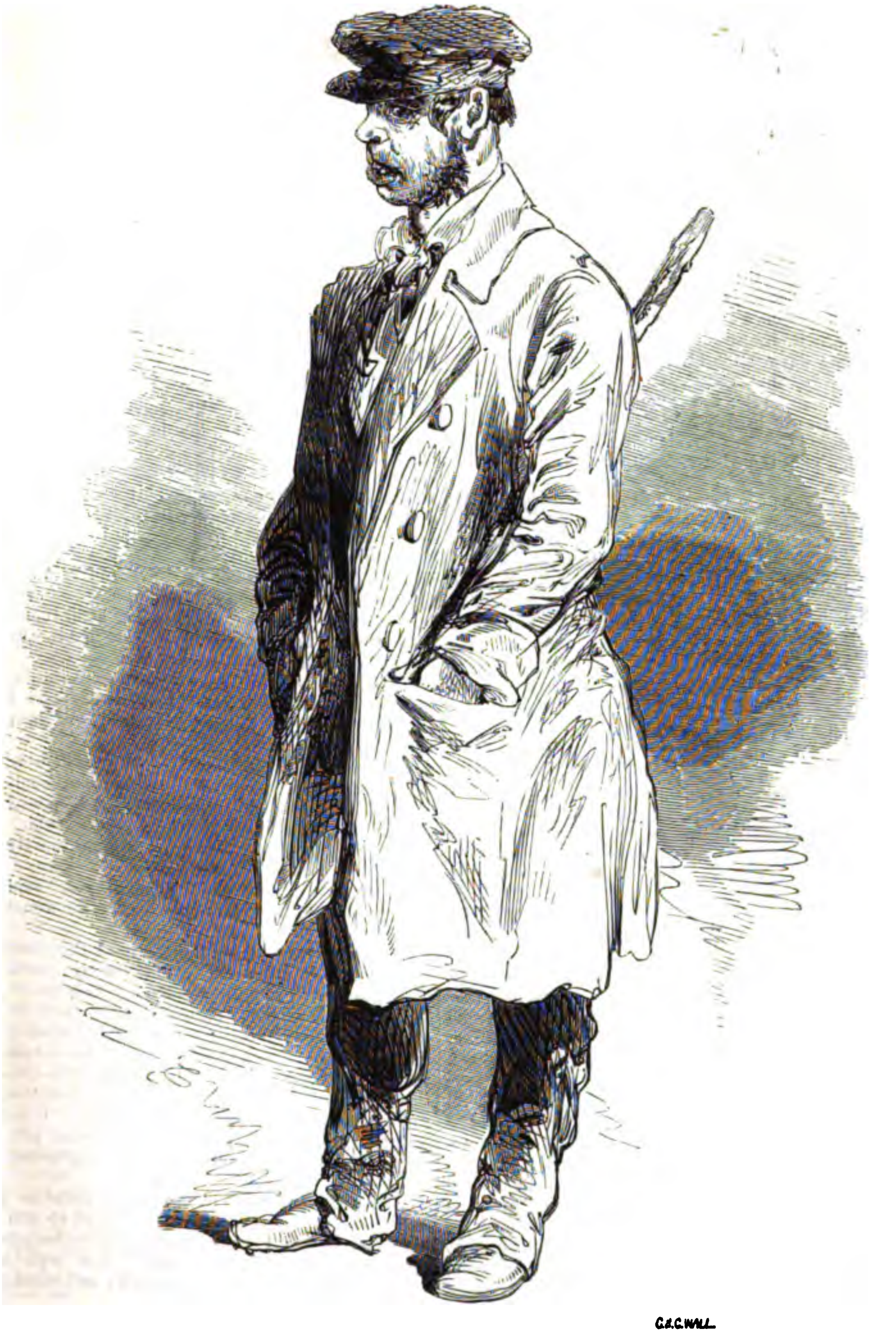
Having thus settled matters to his own special satisfaction, and to the perfect contentment of the two lads, the respectable Mr. Barnes sent the younger one forth to purchase a quantity of commodities, eatable and drinkable, for the evening's repast; while he lighted his pipe, therewith to recreate himself until the serving-up of the proposed banquet.

CHAPTER XX.

CHRISTINA AND LORD OCTAVIAN.

It was, as already stated, a sorrowful thing for Christian and Christina to seperate from each other: nevertheless there were many circumstances to alleviate the bitterness of the pangs thus felt. Each had obtained an excellent situation; and this good fortune had overtaken them both suddenly, at a period when their circumstances were wearing the most deplorable aspect. Besides, youth is not the time when hearts sink irreclaimably into despondency; and moreover, the twins had the solace of knowing that they should meet frequently, and that in a day or two their first interview after their separation might take place.

Thus, by the time that Christina reached her destination in the cab which bore her thither, her tears were dried, and she had composed herself in order to appear with at least a placid if not a cheerful look in the presence of Lady Octavian Meredith. His lordship was not at home when she arrived: indeed he was out purposely. For the reader may conceive with what astonishment, mingled with trepidation, it was that he learnt on the preceding day how accident had led his wife to engage none other than the beautiful Christina Ashton as her companion! His first impulse had been to start an objection: but a second thought had shown him that he could not. He had already cheerfully given the amiable Zoe permission to have such a companion: he dared not now confess to her everything that had passed in respect to himself, Christina, and the duel;—and without giving some such explanations, it would appear simply whimsical and capricious in him to remonstrate against the special choice which his wife had made. He was therefore constrained to leave matters as they thus stood—but to devise some means for preventing Christina from being taken by surprise through a sudden recognition, and from giving vent to ejaculations that would reveal past incidents to his wife.



BARNES THE BURKER.

Lord Octavian was therefore purposely out when Christina arrived at his mansion in the forenoon. He knew that Zoe had promised to take luncheon with her father that day, between one and two o'clock; and he calculated that she would not on this occasion take Christina with her, but would leave her new friend to settle herself in the chamber allotted to her, and become somewhat acquainted with the habitation which was now her home. Indeed, that Zoe would act thus, Octavian had partially gleaned from a remark which she made at the breakfast-table. Therefore, when Lord Octavian thought that his wife had gone across the Park to her father at the appointed time, he returned to his own dwelling.

Meanwhile Christina had been most cordially welcomed by Zoe, and was at once conducted by the amiable lady to the elegantly furnished apartment which she was to occupy. Zoe at first insisted that one of the maid-servants should unpack Christina's boxes and arrange all her things for her in the wardrobe and drawers: but Miss Ashton was not the being to assume the airs of a fine lady, when conscious of her own dependent position; and Zoe was compelled to let her have her own way in this respect. Christina's conduct enhanced her considerably in the good opinion which Lady Octavian Meredith had already formed of her.

When Miss Ashton had finished her little arrangements in her own chamber, she and Zoe passed an hour or two in agreeable conversation; and shortly after one o'clock the lady said, "I am now going to leave you to amuse yourself until three or four. I have promised to visit my father, who has been much chagrined by the heavy loss he sustained through that same Mr. Preston whose conduct was so distressing to yourself. I shall not therefore propose to take you with me to-day; but on another occasion shall be proud and happy to introduce you to Mr. Armytage."

Zoe set out on her visit; and Christina remained alone in the drawing-room. She practised on the splendid piano-forte; and finding that the instrument was a magnificent one, she derived a species of enthusiastic inspiration from the flow of that harmony which she could thus modulate to grandeur or to pathos beneath her delicate fingers. She sang beautifully, and had a sweet melodious voice: so that having tested the capacities of the instrument, she presently began to accompany herself in some air.

But scarcely had she commenced the song, when Lord Octavian Meredith reached the drawing-room door. Those strains floated on his ears—he recognised Christina's voice—he stopped to listen. Himself passionately fond of music, it was with a growing rapture that he thus drank in those delicious sounds, in which the most exquisite vocal and instrumental harmonies were blended. His rapture amounted almost to an ecstacy: his pulses thrilled with delight: it appeared as if he had been suddenly borne to the very threshold of Elysium itself. Noiselessly he turned the handle of the door: as gently and cautiously did he open it; and as he looked in, he beheld Christina seated at the piano, her back towards him. She, totally unconscious of his presence—totally unsuspicious of the opening of the door—continued her music and her delicious warbling, all the ecstatic effects of which were enhanced in Lord Octavian's estimation, now that he was enabled to contemplate her sylphid figure as she was seated there. Her raven tresses were floating over her shoulders: every now and then he caught a vanishing glimpse of her faultless Grecian profile;—every gesture and movement on her part seemed characterized by grace and elegance; and fairer than the piano's ivory keys themselves, were the delicate hands that passed over them. Now did those sweetly tapered fingers appear to skip as it were with almost lightning celerity from note to note: now they rested for a few seconds on some particular keys—while the voice of song continued to blend in ravishing harmony with the music which those fingers made. And that shape too—how beautifully modelled was it! Even if he had never seen her countenance before, Meredith could have staked his existence that the loveliest face must belong to so charming a figure. The song ceased—the last sounds of the music were vibrating tremulously through the apartment as Octavian closed the door, and Christina started up from her seat.

"Mr. Percival," she exclaimed, her first feeling being one of grateful joy, though mingled with surprise thus to encounter the chivalrous individual who had perilled his life in a duel for her sake.

Octavian advanced—took her hand—and as he pressed it warmly, the rapture of his feelings continued to permeate the looks with which he gazed upon Christina. There was nothing insolent in those regards—no libertine effrontery to shock her pure mind—but nevertheless a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which made her withdraw her hand somewhat abruptly as the colour mounted to her cheeks and her eyes were cast down.

"Miss Ashton," said Octavian, "you have delighted me with your musical skill—but may I add, still more with the exquisite beauty of your voice?"

This compliment, delivered in tones that were almost as impassioned as Octavian's looks, completed Christina's confusion: the crimson deepened on her cheeks—and her sweet black eyes, which she had for a moment raised again, were as rapidly bent down once more.

"I hope that I have not offended you," said Octavian, in a soft voice: "not for worlds would I do so!"

"Oh, I believe you, sir!" exclaimed Christina with artless warmth: for it immediately struck her that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. "But frankly speaking," she added, now looking at him with the full ingenuousness of her large clear dark eyes—and she smiled modestly too as she thus spoke, revealing teeth white as oriental pearls,—"I am so little accustomed to be complimented that perhaps I betray too much awkward embarrassment——"

"No—not too much!" ejaculated Octavian: and it was on the very tip of his tongue to add, "I adore you as you are! your very innocence is the greatest of all your charms!"—but with a sudden effort he held the words back; and taking her hand, conducted her to a seat.

"Neither Lord nor Lady Octavian Meredith are at home," said Christina, little thinking that she was addressing one of those of whom she spoke. "Her ladyship will not return for two hours——"

"But Lord Octavian himself is in the house," observed Meredith.

"I will ring and inquire," said Christina: and she was rising from her seat, when the expression of Meredith's countenance struck her as so peculiar that she stopped short.

"No—Miss Ashton," he said, "you need not make any such inquiry. Pardon me for a little deceit which was practised on you—forgive me—listen to me——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Christina, with a faint shriek: but instantaneously recovering herself, she said somewhat coldly, "*You*, then, are Lord Octavian Meredith?"

"I am," he responded. "Pray resume your seat—and suffer me to give you those explanations which are requisite."

Christina hesitated. There was in her mind a vague sense of impropriety in remaining alone with the young nobleman who had deceived her; and yet she felt that it was a duty both to herself and to him to listen to whatsoever he might have to say. She accordingly sat down again—but spoke not a word; and her look was still cold, but with a certain tremulousness in it.

"You will remember, Miss Ashton," proceeded Meredith, speaking in the most respectful tone, and with a corresponding look—for he felt that he had an exceedingly difficult part to perform,—"you will remember that on the day I had the satisfaction of rendering you a trifling service, I penetrated your motives in asking my name. You saw that a duel was probable—nay, more, that it was inevitable; and with the most generous of purposes you intended to give information to a magistrate. But my honour was at stake; and I was bound to meet that antagonist whom circumstances had suddenly raised up. Therefore, to prevent your generous intentions from being carried out, I gave a false name——"

"True!" murmured Christina, as all the circumstances flashed vividly back to her mind.

"That duel," continued Meredith, "took place, as you are aware: but as no injury was the result, it was so completely hushed up that it never reached Lady Octavian's ears. I trust to your generosity that it shall continue a secret in respect to her. But to continue my explanations. I promised you, Miss Ashton, that you should be made acquainted with the result of that duel—that if I fell, my second should wait upon you with the intelligence—but that if I escaped unhurt, I would personally call to convince you of my safety. I did call—I sent up the name by which you already knew me: it was however my intention to reveal myself fully to your knowledge. But when I beheld the simple tastes and pursuits of your brother and yourself—pardon me for thus speaking—I thought that the frank and affable manner in which I was received, and the friendly feeling which your brother specially exhibited towards me, might receive a check if I proclaimed myself to be of titled rank. In my estimation that rank is nothing: but I know full well that as the world goes, as society is constituted, and as prejudices have their influence, an aristocratic name has a certain *prestige*——In a word, I saw enough of you both to wish to become your friend; and I feared that as Lord Octavian Meredith I might not experience the same frank and open-hearted reception which was already given to Mr. Percival."

Meredith ceased: but Christina did not immediately answer him. As a matter of course the explanation was entirely satisfactory up to the point where it treated of the visit to the lodgings after the duel: but from that point to the end it was less satisfactory. Miss Ashton was too artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated herself, to penetrate the subtleties of the human soul: but on the other hand, she was too intelligent and right-minded not to entertain a certain misgiving as to the young nobleman's complete self-exculpation. A vague idea that the latter portion of his speech had some sophistry in it, floated in her imagination: but yet she could scarcely explain the feeling to herself—from the simple reason that she could not possibly suppose Meredith to have been smitten with her beauty.

"My lord," she at length said, speaking gravely and seriously, "I thank you for the explanations which you have given me: but I do not see how it is possible for me to withhold from her ladyship the circumstance that we have met before."

"You have not as yet uttered a word to Zoe about that duel?" inquired Octavian hastily. "I know you did not yesterday—but to-day?"

"I have never spoken of it to a soul except my brother," responded Christina. "But I really cannot comprehend, my lord, wherefore you should object to her ladyship becoming acquainted with a generous deed which you performed. The danger, thank heaven! has long been over——"

"Miss Ashton," interrupted Meredith, "your own good sense will tell you that it can be no welcome intelligence for a wife to learn that her husband has for more than two months treasured up a secret from her. Proclaim the truth, if you will, to Zoe—but pardon me for saying that you will be guilty of an act of unkindness towards myself, inasmuch as my wife would never put confidence in me again. If I happened to rise at an earlier hour than usual in the morning—or if I were detained out later than is my wont at night—she would torture herself with all possible anxieties—she would picture to herself her husband involved in some cruel dilemma the imminence of which he had carefully concealed from her——"

"Yes, my lord," interrupted Christina; "all that you say is but too true. Nevertheless, I feel that I cannot be guilty of a deception towards an amiable lady who has received me in the kindest manner——No, I cannot! I will say nothing of past events: but I will withdraw from the house at once. Yes—whatsoever construction may be put on this step——"

"Miss Ashton," exclaimed Octavian Meredith, "I would rather ten thousand times that you should tell Zoe everything! What could she possibly think if you withdrew yourself thus abruptly? She would either imagine that you had received some insult from me, and were too generous to mention it; or on the other hand that you were conscious of some unworthiness of your own which you were afraid of transpiring. Against the former suspicion how could I possibly vindicate myself when all appearances would be in my disfavour?—and as for the latter suspicion, sooner than that *you* should suffer one tittle in the estimation of Zoe, I would proclaim everything!"

Christina beheld all the truth and none of the sophistry—for there was a blending of both—contained in these arguments. She was bewildered how to act. Not for the world would she bring mischief into a house the lady of which had received her with open arms!—but on the other hand she could not bear the idea of harbouring a secret which to her pure mind savoured so much of a deception.

"Now, Miss Ashton, you must decide upon the course which you intend to pursue," resumed Lord Octavian: and it was with the greatest difficulty he could conceal the anxiety and suspense which he experienced. "There are but two alternatives for your choice: the one is that her ladyship shall be made acquainted with everything, and her confidence in me be thereby destroyed—or that she shall remain in total ignorance of the past, and her happiness continue undisturbed."

"If those be the alternatives, my lord," responded Christina, "I cannot for another moment hesitate between them. It shall be as you wish."

"Thank you, Miss Ashton," answered Meredith: but he was now so completely on his guard that he did not suffer his looks to betray the joy that he felt at the decision to which the beautiful Christina had just come: nor did he speak in tones, nor bend such looks upon her, which might again cover her with confusion, and perhaps engender in her mind a suspicion of the love with which she had inspired him, but of the existence of which she was as yet evidently altogether ignorant.

Scarcely was this understanding arrived at—and just as Christina was about to rise from her seat and retire to her own apartment—the door was thrown open, and the footman announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"My dear Meredith," said his Grace, advancing into the room with a well-bred air of easy familiarity; "it is an age since we met!"

His quick eye had at once caught sight of Christina: at once too had he recognised in her the sister of his young secretary, by the similitude existing between them: but he preserved the completest control over his looks—at first affecting not to perceive her at all, and then bowing with the air of a man who has nothing peculiar in his mind when in the presence of some one whom he sees for the first time.

"Permit me, my lord," said Meredith, "to introduce you to Miss Ashton—a friend of Lady Octavian's."

"Delighted to have the honour of Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the Duke, again bowing: and then for the first time appearing to be struck by anything in reference to her, he ejaculated, "Dear me, how strange! I have a young gentleman with me, bearing the same name; and——pardon the observation——but the resemblance is so striking!"

"And no wonder, my lord," exclaimed Meredith, with a good-humoured air; "for the young gentleman to whom you allude, is this young lady's brother."

"I am more than ever glad to form Miss Ashton's acquaintance," said the Duke, with another courteous bow: "for I have taken a very great fancy to young Mr. Ashton—and I am sure that he and I shall be excellent friends. We have not had above a dozen words of conversation this morning—indeed he has only been a few hours at Marchmont House—and therefore I had no opportunity of learning from his lips that his sister was here. The pleasure of meeting Miss Ashton is therefore all the greater, on account of being so completely unexpected."

The Duke of Marchmont had been telling a great falsehood. He had learnt from Christian where his sister was now located; and in his anxiety to behold that being who he felt persuaded was Octavian's "fair unknown" of some little time past, he had paid the present visit. He did not remain above a quarter of an hour; and neither by look nor word did he suffer Octavian to perceive that he had fathomed the secret, and that in Christina he felt convinced he *did* behold that fair unknown. As for Miss Ashton herself, she was about to leave the room at the expiration of a few minutes: but both Meredith and Marchmont assured her that they had no private business to converse upon; and for courtesy's sake she was compelled to remain. When however the Duke had taken his leave, she at once ascended to her own chamber,—where she tarried until Lady Octavian returned from her father's house. Then she re-appeared in the drawing-room; and to her great relief found that Meredith was not there. He did not re-enter the dwelling until a quarter of an hour before dinner-time, when Zoe was in her own chamber, preparing her evening toilet. Christina had therefore ample leisure to throw off any embarrassment which Lord Octavian's presence occasioned her, before Zoe joined them in the drawing-room; and her ladyship saw nothing in the countenance of either to lead her to suspect that they had met before this day.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHRISTIAN'S FIRST DAY AT MARCHMONT HOUSE.

Having thus seen Christina Ashton installed in the situation which she had accepted, let us follow her brother to the mansion of the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont. On arriving there, he was requested by a footman to follow him to the housekeeper's room; and in a few minutes he was introduced to that important female functionary.

We may here as well observe that the steward and housekeeper were husband and wife, and that their name was Calvert. They were an elderly couple,—Mr. Calvert of spare figure, sedate countenance, and remarkable precision both of speech and manners—his wife a stout, matronly, comfortable-looking dame, always exceedingly neat in her apparel, and priding herself highly on the regularity and good discipline which her husband and herself maintained in the domestic department of the household. They were excessively strict—but at the same time straightforward and right-principled. They exercised no overbearing despotism themselves, and allowed no petty tyrannies to be practised by the superior servants towards the inferior ones. They had their own parlour, where they usually took their meals together: but of a Sunday they generally invited the butler, the lady's-maids, and one or two of the upper servants—such as his Grace's valets—to feast at their dining-table.

It was to this comfortable little parlour that Christian Ashton was conducted by the gorgeously dressed footman; and there he found Mr. and Mrs. Calvert seated together. Both were looking over accounts; and in front of each was a goodly pile of money in bank-notes, gold, and silver. When the footman announced Mr. Ashton, they both desisted from their occupation, and rose to receive the young gentleman. The steward bowed primly—the housekeeper proffered the youth her hand: he was invited to sit down—and then did the explanations commence in respect to the arrangements which had been made for his comfort at Marchmont House.

"I have ordered a nice cheerful little bedchamber to be prepared for you," said Mrs. Calvert; "and I will show you to it presently. His Grace has suggested, if you have no objection, that you should take your meals with us——"

"And *we* have no objection," interposed Mr. Calvert, in a half-patronising manner, which was nevertheless both kind and respectful: "for you appear to be a young gentleman whose company will be agreeable to us."

"And I am sure," resumed Mrs. Calvert, "we will do all we can to render you comfortable. One thing we must beg to observe—which is that we are very regular in our meals: breakfast at nine—dinner at two—tea at six—and supper at nine. But of course, if at any time you wish for refreshment, you have only to signify such a desire, and it shall be instantaneously complied with."

"While thanking you for your assurances of making me comfortable," answered Christian, "I can safely promise that I shall conform to your regulations."

"His Grace desired me to tell you," said the steward, after a brief pause, "that you are welcome to use the library as much as you think fit when his Grace is elsewhere; and on those occasions when it suits his lordship to be alone there, you can make our parlour your sitting-room. Or there is a little cabinet near the library, which Mrs. Calvert will show you presently, where you are welcome to sit when you choose to be alone——In short, I have not the slightest doubt you will soon fall into the regular routine of the household, and that you will speedily find yourself at home."

Christian again expressed his thanks for the kind assurances thus given him, and the forethought which had dictated all those suggestions for his comfort and well-being.

"And now," said Mrs. Calvert, "would you like a piece of cake and a glass of wine?—or a *leetle* drop of cherry-brandy? for the weather is uncommonly cold:"—and as the worthy matron thus spoke, she repaired to a cupboard of considerable dimensions, and the shelves of which were crowded with pots of preserves, cakes, biscuits, bottles of wine, spirits, and liqueurs—and all those little luxuries which are invariably to be found in a housekeeper's room in a wealthy mansion.

Christian however declined the proffered refreshment,—for it was still early in the forenoon; and moreover his heart was full at being separated from his beloved sister.

"Well then, Mr. Ashton," said the dame, "let me show you at once to your quarters; and when you have arranged the contents of your boxes, you can report your arrival to the Duke."

Mrs. Calvert accordingly conducted the young secretary up a back staircase, to a chamber which though on one of the upper storeys, was nevertheless a most comfortable little apartment,—looking upon a small garden that there was at the back of the mansion. She then led him along a corridor—down the upper flights of the principal staircase—as far as the first floor; and there she showed him the entrance to the picture-gallery, assuring him that he was perfectly welcome to lounge in there and amuse himself whensoever he might think fit. Decending thence into the entrance-hall, Mrs. Calvert conducted Christian to the library, which was on the ground-floor, and the windows of which looked upon the garden. It was a spacious apartment,—containing handsome mahogany cases, the shelves of which were crowded with elegantly-bound volumes, all protected by glass-doors. By the side of the library was a little parlour—a narrow slip indeed—with one window, also looking on the garden; and this was denominated the cabinet, the free use of which was placed at Christian's disposal.

Having thus far initiated him into the geography of the mansion, Mrs. Calvert returned to her own sitting-room—while Christian ascended to his chamber to unpack his boxes and arrange his clothes in the drawers. He then made himself look as neat as possible; and descending to the entrance-hall, requested a footman to announce his arrival to the Duke. In a few minutes Christian was desired to attend his Grace in the library; and thither he accordingly repaired.

"Well," said Marchmont, with a half-smile, "so you made up your mind to come and live in the house?"

"Your Grace was kind enough to leave me to my own choice in the matter," replied the youth; "and having consulted with my sister, I called yesterday afternoon——"

"Yes, yes—your message was delivered to me," said the Duke: "you intimated your intention to come and take up your abode here to-day—and you have doubtless already found that arrangements have been made to insure your comfort?"

"For which I sincerely thank your Grace," rejoined Christian.

"Nothing to thank me for," said Marchmont carelessly: then, after a pause—during which he had motioned Christian to take a seat,—he observed, as if still in the same careless, indifferent manner, "And what is your sister going to do? Coming to live in the neighbourhood, I suppose, so that you may see each other often?"

"No, my lord," replied Christian: "fortunately my sister obtained a situation at the very same hour yesterday forenoon that I was so happy as to satisfy your Grace's requirements."

"Ah, indeed—a situation?" said Marchmont. "And what is it?"

"Companion, my lord, to a lady living in the Regent's Park."

Duke of Marchmont, speaking with a certain tone of resoluteness, as if he felt himself to be in the position of one who could dictate and command.

"And I have frankly told your Grace," replied Stanhope, "that I have not twelve thousand shillings at this present moment."

"True," remarked the Duke curtly. "You admit therefore that you are in my power?"

"So completely in your Grace's power, that if you expose me to the world, I have no alternative but to place the muzzle of a pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger valiantly—or else take a drop of prussic acid and yield up my life as if it were a lightning-flash passing out of me:"—and it was in a singular but horrible tone of mingled irony and desperation that the Hon. Mr. Stanhope thus spoke.

"I have given you to understand," replied the Duke, "that to neither of these agreeable alternatives need you have recourse, provided——"

"Ah,—provided!" ejaculated Stanhope. "Then there is a condition——a condition beyond the mere one of giving your Grace some security for eventual payment? But, my lord, is it possible that this condition is of such a character that you dare not look me in the face while explaining it—and that for this reason you have brought me into a room where the darkness is as deep as that of the grave?"

"Would you have me give you credit for being over nice and particular?" asked the Duke, in a somewhat sneering tone. "Now look you, Mr. Stanhope—you and I have not known each other for much more than a couple of months or so—ten weeks at the very outside. It was the duel which first rendered us acquainted——"

"It was, my lord. Go on."

"During these ten weeks—if indeed our acquaintance has been so long—I have seen quite enough of you, and have learnt perhaps still more——"

"I can anticipate what your Grace would say," interrupted Stanhope coldly, yet somewhat bitterly. "You know that I am a gambler, and that already an almost princely fortune has gone into the hands of a set of harpies——Maledictions upon them!—the bare thought of it is enough to make a man forswear cards and dice for evermore. You know too that I am dissipated—fond of pleasure—having a certain position in society which it were death to lose—having also a certain appearance to keep up, to fail in which were to carry me at once to the necessity of suicide. Well, my lord, all these things you know; and what is more still, you feel that my cursed ill luck of the last three hours has left me entirely at your mercy. Judging of my habits, and taking my desperate condition into account, you regard me as a suitable instrument for some purpose you have in hand. Is it not so?"

"It is," responded the Duke of Marchmont.

"Then your lordship might have said so at first, without any unnecessary circumlocution; and you might likewise say so within the sphere of a lamp's light and over a glass of wine."

"Not so!" rejoined the Duke. "As we are here in the dark, so will we remain until our conference be ended. As for the wine, it all depends upon the understanding to which we come, whether we adjourn to the dining-room and empty a decanter ere we part——"

"It may be as well if I inform your Grace at once that I am *not* exceedingly particular in what I do to save myself from ruin. A man," continued Mr. Stanhope, "who has found himself compelled to contemplate suicide, and to talk of it, is not likely to stick at a trifle or two if it will enable him to *live*. To live—yes! but in his usual manner, I mean—with gold at his command—the means of pleasure at his bidding——"

"And all these shall be within your reach!" interrupted Marchmont. "Now look you, my dear fellow,—for circumstances are rendering you and me closely intimate. Indeed, I wish you to become intimate with me—I wish you to call at the house every day—to dine with me three or four times a week; and for that purpose I will dine at home on the occasions when you are coming. I wish you to call in the afternoon and lounge in the drawing-room in conversation with the Duchess—I wish you to pay your court to her—to make yourself agreeable to her Grace—to pass round to her box when she is at the theatre or at the Opera——"

"And what in the devil's name," cried Stanhope, with accents of unfeigned amazement, "does your Grace purpose by all this?"

"You owe me twelve thousand pounds, which you cannot pay," responded the Duke: "and I have no doubt that it would be an agreeable thing if this twelve thousand pounds were not merely forgiven you, but that a like sum were handed over to you as a testimonial of my esteem——all private, secret, and confidential, you know, and entirely between ourselves."

"It must be a tremendous service which your Grace demands for such a colossal reward:"—and Stanhope spoke gravely and seriously.

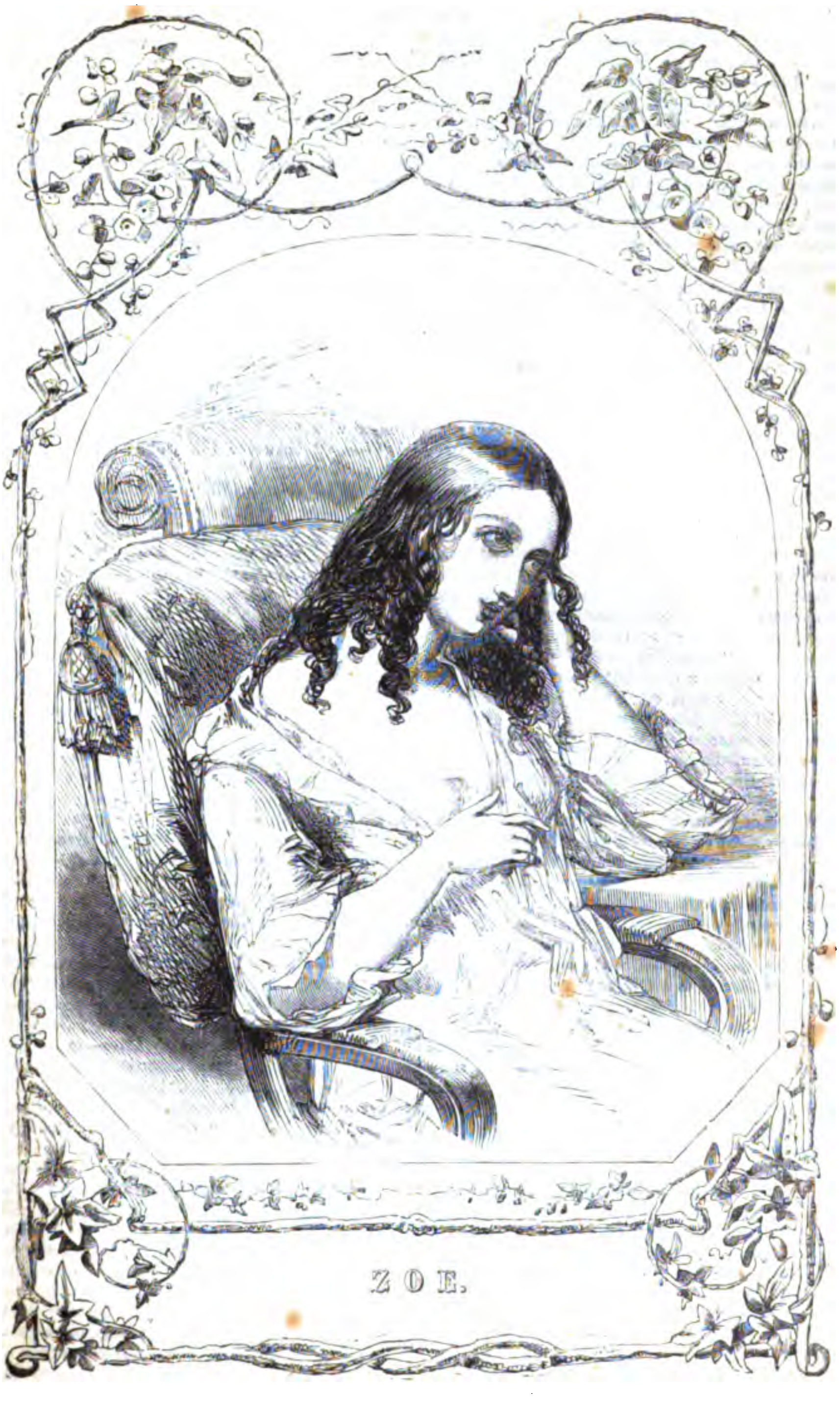
"It *is* an immense service which you will be rendering me," replied the Duke,—"but one which *you* can perform with few scruples of conscience; while on the other hand there is great *eclat* to be obtained thereby."

"I am as completely in the dark with respect to your Grace's meaning," said Mr. Stanhope, "as I am in the place where we are now talking. Can you not come to the point? Frankly speaking, I infinitely dislike this roundabout manner which your Grace is adopting——"

"Then, in a few words," interrupted the Duke, "I will explain myself. You are to become intimate with me—you are to pay your court, as I have already said, to the Duchess—you will be a constant visitor here—you will literally besiege her Grace. Then the world will begin to talk: no matter! I shall see nothing that is going on; and if the world choose to consider me blind, be it so. But at length I shall awaken all of a sudden—something will occur to fill me with suspicion——an intercepted letter, for instance—a letter, you comprehend, from yourself to her Grace—in which you will speak of the love subsisting between you——Aye, and you will even go farther—you will leave no doubt as to the criminal nature of that love——"

"But suppose that nothing of all this does really take place," interrupted Stanhope: "suppose that her Grace conceives a hatred for me?"

"And very likely she will," observed the Duke coolly: "but what has that got to do with your



ZOE.

incessant visits, and with the letter which in a few months' time you will write and which you will take care that I shall intercept? May I not play the part of a dishonoured and outraged husband? will not you stand the brunt of an action for crim. con., when you know perfectly well that I shall never call upon you to pay such damages as may be awarded? and may I not, upon such foundation as the jury's verdict affords, sue for a divorce against a woman whom I hate and detest? May not, I ask, all these things take place?—and if you get as good as twenty-four thousand pounds for rendering me this service, will not you be a gainer as well as I? Besides, only think of the honour and credit of having the reputation of intriguing with a Duchess! Why, my good fellow, it will make your fortune in more ways than one—it will be to you better than all that fortune which you have lost at the gambling-table. The whole fashionable world will at once vote you their lion—their star—their phœnix—their cynosure. The men will burst with envy and with jealousy, when with a half-smile upon your countenance you stroll jauntily into the brilliant saloons of patrician mansions: the ladies will tap you with their fans and call you the naughty creature——"

"A truce to this bantering!" interrupted Stanhope sharply—almost sternly. "It is true that I am in your Grace's power; but I am not for that reason to be rendered your laughing-stock. It is impossible that you can mean what you say!"

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the Duke of Marchmont.

"By Heaven, my lord! it is a matter wherein I cannot give you credit for the seriousness you speak of, unless you prove it. How know I but that it is some snare, though incomprehensible—some pitfall, though unaccountable—wherein you seek to entrap me? And this dark room too——"

"Perdition take your constant recurrence to the darkness of the room!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "You demand proof?—it is difficult to give. And yet in many circumstances may you recognise such proof. For upwards of fifteen years have I been married to Lavinia—and she has given me no heir. Think you that I, bearing one of the proudest titles in all Christendom—and that title, too, associated with immense wealth,—think you, I ask, that I do not yearn to possess an heir to my distinctions and to my riches? The estates are strictly entailed: think you therefore that it is a pleasurable thing for me to reflect that at my death some far-removed relative, some remote connexion whose very existence is at present unknown to me—may spring up—possibly from amidst the dregs of society—for the highest families may be found to have connexions, though very distant ones, in the lowest sphere——think you, I ask, that it is agreeable for me to reflect that some such dirty claimant may arise when I am gone and prove his right to the coronet which I wear, the estates over which I now lord it, and the mansions which my taste has embellished? Now, Stanhope, have I given proofs of my sincerity in seeking a divorce from her who presents me with no heir?"

There was a profound silence in the library for upwards of a minute,—at the expiration of which Mr. Stanhope slowly said, "Yes—I now believe your Grace to be sincere."

"Oh, it is well that I have succeeded in convincing you at last," observed the Duke.

"I believe you sincere in wishing for an heir," continued Stanhope: "but in the extreme measure which your Grace proposes——"

"That regards *me*," interrupted the Duke. "It is for *you* to consider whether you will enter into my project, and carry it out in the way that I have suggested—or with such variations as circumstances may render advisable, always keeping the one grand aim in view."

"I will!" answered Stanhope. "Yes—my necessities compel me——I will do it."

"Then there is no more to be said at present," observed the Duke. "There is a light in the hall—we will repair to the dining-room—I cannot promise you a fire——"

"My blood," interrupted Stanhope, "has not yet cooled down from the terrific fever-heat produced by the excitement of the gaming-table. Let us have the bottle of wine—the fire may be dispensed with."

"Come," answered the Duke: "we will have the wine."

Christian then heard the double doors of the library open: the light from the hall gleamed in for a moment, and showed him the two forms as they passed the threshold. Then the doors were closed again; and again was the youth entombed in utter darkness.

But let us explain how it was that he had continued so silent and so still throughout this discourse which he had overheard. When first he became aware that voices were speaking in the library, he was seized, as we have stated, with a certain degree of alarm; and this he could not all in a moment shake off. Called out of his sleep in such a manner—finding himself in the dark—not immediately recollecting where he was—and hearing those voices—he thought he must be in a dream; and the terror which he felt, as well as the numbing cold, completely paralysed him. When his consciousness became complete, he learnt from the Duke's words that it was long past midnight, and that the household had retired to rest. The thought instantaneously struck him that if he were found there, sitting up at such an hour, he should be chided—perhaps dismissed from the situation which he had only entered in the morning. This idea appalled him; he was bewildered how to act; and while in this terrible state of uncertainty—not daring to move—scarcely to breathe—the conversation progressed rapidly between the Duke and Mr. Stanhope. As the reader has seen, it soon became of a nature which the Duke would not for the world have had anybody overhear; and thus Christian saw that his position was becoming every instant more and more difficult. When the discourse had got to a certain extent, he dared not suddenly raise his voice and proclaim that there was a listener present:—the natural question would be, wherefore he had remained to listen at all? So he continued motionless and silent, in the hope that the Duke and his companion would speedily pass away from the library. But as the discourse progressed, it assumed a complexion so astounding—so startling indeed, if Christian had dared to start at all,—it grew so engrossing in its terrible interest, that forgetting every other circumstance he drank in the whole with his amazed sense of hearing. Thus did he tarry there until the end; and even after the double doors had closed behind the Duke and Mr. Stanhope, it was a long time ere Christian could venture to draw a breath freely.

Good heavens, what a tale had he heard! What a diabolical conspiracy had become revealed to his knowledge!—in what a fearful light was the character of his employer suddenly presented to his comprehension! But was it not natural that the youth should say to himself, "It is Providence that placed me here on this occasion, to learn the deeply-plotted scheme of villany, and to become the divine instrument in frustrating it!"

His first impulse was now to rush to the dining-room—proclaim to the two conspirators that their horrible machinations had come to his knowledge—rush forth in disgust from the house—and on the morrow reveal everything to a magistrate, or to the relatives of the Duchess, if he could find out who they were. This, we say, was his first impulse; and he was starting from his seat to obey it—when a thought struck him, and he sat down again. If he were to carry out such a plan, would it succeed? should he be believed? would not the Duke and Stanhope indignantly deny the imputation and denounce it as the raving of a madman or the odious calumny of a miserable impostor? And would not the world give its faith to the bold denial of those two men of high social position, rather than to the unsupported testimony of an obscure individual?—might not such conduct on Christian's part be even attributed to a vindictive feeling towards the man who had recently insulted his sister? All these considerations induced Christian to pause. Then, what course should he pursue? His mind was far too unsettled—his thoughts were too much excited, to allow him to come to any conclusion on the present occasion. He accordingly stole forth from the library—groped his way along a passage to the back staircase—and succeeded in reaching his chamber without disturbing any one.

We should here observe that when the household had retired to rest, Mr. and Mrs. Calvert fancied that the young secretary had already sought his own room,—little dreaming that he had fallen asleep in the library and was continuing to slumber there while lamp and fire went out.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ADVISER.

CHRISTIAN awoke after a few hours' of troubled repose; and it was still dusk on that cold wintry morning. He did not therefore immediately get up—but began to arrange all his confused ideas, so as to convince himself that what was uppermost in his thoughts was not merely the recollection of a dream. His convictions told him that it was indeed all too true; and he perceived the necessity of deciding on the course which he should adopt.

For the various reasons which had occurred to him on the preceding night, and which we have detailed at the close of the last chapter, he felt how impossible it was to proclaim to the world all he knew. Yet how could he remain in the employment of a man whom he had thus discovered to be the most black-hearted of villains? On the other hand, if he were to withdraw from the house, how could he serve the Duchess and frustrate the satanic plot which was in embryo for her destruction? No—he must remain beneath that roof: for once more did the thought revert to his mind that heaven itself had willed him to become its own instrument for the salvation of an innocent lady and the confusion of her foes. Should he speak to the Duchess upon the subject? No: not for a single moment could he hope or expect that she would believe him. If she had known him for years, it would be different: but he was an utter stranger to her—he had only been in the house a few hours—she had seen him but for a few moments—and it would be the height of madness to expect that she would give credit to a tale so horribly damnatory to her husband's character. He must remain quiet for the present—he must watch the progress of events—and he must act accordingly.

But how could he assume a placid and respectful demeanour in the presence of the Duke? how could he maintain a becoming deportment before one whom he now knew to be a detestable miscreant? Christian abominated dissimulation: he was high-minded and well principled: his soul was imbued with the loftiest notions of honour and integrity: he was as truthful for one of his own sex, as his sister was for a being of the feminine race. And yet if Christian remained at Marchmont House, he must dissimulate—he must to a certain extent play the hypocrite—he must treat the Duke of Marchmont as if he knew naught to his detriment—he must wear a contented, if not a smiling and cheerful countenance: in a word, he must play a part which he despised, loathed, and abhorred. It was difficult indeed for Christian Ashton to bend himself to this necessity: and yet for the sake of the Duchess he resolved to do so. He felt that any sacrifice of feeling must be made on his own part in order to save an innocent lady from the atrocious machinations which had been devised for her destruction.

At about ten o'clock he attended the Duke in the library; and his Grace bade him sit down to answer the letters which had come by that morning's post. These were chiefly on business-matters from the bailiffs of the Duke's provincial estates—from tenants soliciting renewals of leases, or requesting forbearance in respect to arrears of rent—from country-gentlemen earnestly begging the Duke's interest to procure Government situations for their sons or other relatives—and so forth. On the backs of the greater portion of these documents, the Duke noted the replies which were to be transmitted; and Christian proceeded to execute his work to the best of his ability. As each responsive letter was finished, he handed it across the table to the Duke of Marchmont,—who was evidently well satisfied with the manner in which his young secretary acquitted himself of his duties. Thus nearly two hours were passed; and it was about noon when a footman entered and presented to his Grace a card upon a massive and exquisitely wrought silver salver.

"Ah, Mr. Hyde," said the Duke, as he glanced at the card. "I sent for him yesterday. Let him come in."

The footman withdrew; and Christian, thinking that the business might be private, rose from his seat and was about to retire also—but the Duke made a motion for him to remain, observing, "There is no necessity for you to leave. On the contrary, I wish you to pay attention to what is about to take place—so that immediately after Mr. Hyde has departed, you may make notes of our conversation. He is a slippery kind of fellow, and I must nail him to his pledges—or else never again shall he represent a pocket-borough of mine." Then, after a brief pause, the Duke observed for the information of his secretary, "This Mr. Hyde, you must know, is a Member of Parliament."

The door opened; and the footman announced the visitor in a loud voice. Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, M.P. for the borough of Viviandale, was a gentleman about forty—of middle height and spare figure—affected in his looks and speech—smirking and obsequious in his manners. He was exquisitely dressed, in a blue surtout coat, a figured silk waistcoat, black pantaloons, and patent leather boots. His cravat was tied in a most unexceptionable manner; a massive gold chain festooned over his waistcoat; and his kid gloves fitted so tightly that he had some difficulty in drawing off the one from the right hand, as with divers bowings and scrapings he extended that same right hand in the evident expectation that it would be taken by the Duke, towards whom he advanced with a sort of skipping, mincing gait. He was by no means good-looking, notwithstanding all the pains lavished upon his toilet, the wavy curls of his long dark hair, and the artificial gloss of his whiskers. He was every inch the time-server and the parasite,—feeling himself to be dependent upon the breath of the great man to whose presence he was thus summoned, yet endeavouring to carry off the consciousness of his servile condition by a jaunty air of smirking familiarity, which would doubtless impress an inexperienced stranger with the idea that he felt himself to be on a tolerably friendly if not altogether equal footing with his Grace.

But the Duke of Marchmont, bowing distantly, affected not to perceive Fenwick Finnikin Hyde's outstretched hand; and coldly motioned to a seat,—which that gentleman, endeavouring to look surprised at this reception, at once took. Then, as he held his well-brushed glossy hat upon his knees, he said in a weak affected voice, "Glad to see your Grace looking so well. Never saw your Grace looking better. Quite astonishing—'pon my honour!"

The Duke simply inclined his head in acknowledgement of these compliments; and then observed in a cold severe voice, "I requested you to call upon me, Mr. Hyde, that you may give some little explanations——"

"Quite right, my lord! Always glad to wait upon your Grace to explain what is going forward in the political world. But——" and he glanced towards Christian.

"This young gentleman is my private secretary," said the Duke; "and we may speak in his presence. Indeed, he will not pay any attention to what we may have to say: for, as you perceive he is busy in answering letters."

"Oh, very good, my lord!" exclaimed Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, bestowing a patronising smile upon Christian. "Of course, if your Grace has no objection to the young gentleman being present, I can have none. Seen this morning's papers, my lord? Astonishing how they are turning against the Ministry—astonishing, 'pon my honour!"

"And I could wish, Mr. Hyde," said the Duke, with a voice and look of severe meaning, "that certain gentlemen belonging to the House of Commons would be equally firm in their opposition to that same most despicable Cabinet. I think, Mr. Hyde, that you addressed your constituents at Viviandale a few days back?"

"Quite right, my lord," exclaimed the honourable gentleman. "Public dinner given to me by the free and independent electors—exceedingly sorry that your Grace was not in the chair. Astonishing enthusiasm nevertheless,—astonishing, 'pon my honour!"—and Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde caressed his whiskers with an assumed look of complaisance; though a very close observer might have seen that he was sitting somewhat uneasily on his chair, like a school-boy who has committed a fault, and being summoned into the presence of his master, is dreading the moment when he will be charged therewith.

"Yes, Mr. Hyde," resumed Marchmont, still speaking severely, "you *did* attend a public dinner at Viviandale—a dinner, sir, at which there were one hundred and thirty-three electors present—being the Tory majority of the two hundred and nine freemen of the borough. And that Tory majority as a matter of course looks to *me* as the lord and master of their opinions, their consciences, and their souls. There is no mistake about the matter, Mr. Hyde: the borough is mine—and no gentleman can continue to represent it if once he forfeits my confidence."

"Quite right, my lord—certainly not!" ejaculated the Member for Viviandale: and then he smiled with a forced complacency, as if he meant it to be inferred that *he* had not by any means forfeited his ducal patron's confidence.

"If you consider that I am right, Mr. Hyde," proceeded Marchmont, "you will not be astonished if I frankly intimate that unless your conduct undergoes a change, *you* will at the next general election cease to be the representative of Viviandale. There were passages in your speech, sir, which unmistakably indicated a tendency towards what is generally known as *ratting*——"

"Astonishing, quite astonishing, 'pon my honour!" cried the honourable gentleman, holding up his hands in amazement. "Really, my lord, if your Grace had only heard the cheers which my speech elicited——"

"I care nothing for the cheers, sir," interrupted Marchmont haughtily. "There may perhaps be some few of my tenant-farmers as well as of the tradesmen of Viviandale, who are infected with revolutionary notions, and who in their hearts rebel against my authority. They may therefore cheer, sir, what are called liberal sentiments—although they dare not fly in my face and give their votes in the same sense. But I tell you that I care nothing for the cheers so long as the votes are always of the right sort. Your speech, Mr.

Hyde, savoured of treachery, and there is positively a rumour afloat—I must speak out plainly—that you have sold yourself to the Whigs."

"Astonishing—quite astonishing, 'pon my honour!" ejaculated the honourable gentleman. "Really, my lord, I am surprised that your Grace should give credit to such rumours."

"Take care that they do *not* prove true, Mr. Hyde. Remember the understanding on which you were first brought in for Viviandale—the conditions on which I paid your electioneering expenses—the terms on which for three Parliaments you have represented my borough. By heaven, sir, if you deceive me, you shall be turned out next time; and I will put in my steward or my butler——aye, or even one of my footmen, rather than stand the chance of being turned round upon. You solemnly pledged yourself to stand by Church and State in all things—to denounce the people generally as a base ignorant mob—to hold up the working classes in particular as an unwashed rabble—to oppose everything in the shape of progress—to support all aristocratic privileges—in a word, to conduct yourself as a staunch Tory in all questions where there could be no doubt as to the course you were to pursue, while in all dubious matters you were to vote precisely according to *my* dictation. Now, Mr. Hyde, during the last session you did not act up entirely to these pledges: but I then said nothing on the subject. Your recent speech at Viviandale has however enhanced my misgivings; and the rumours which are afloat almost seem to confirm them. What am I to understand, sir? and what am I to expect?"

"Understand, my lord, nothing against me. Expect, my lord, that I shall serve your Grace in all things. But the fact is," continued Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde, with a smile half blandly complacent and half smirkingly sycophantic, "a man must now and then make a show of independence——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the Duke indignantly. "The borough of Viviandale is my own—as well as those of Rottentown and Mongerville; and depend upon it I shall do as I like with my own. Independence indeed—it is ridiculous! The five seats which those boroughs have in the House of Commons are *mine;* and I mean that the occupants of them shall do *my* bidding. What will become of our blessed Constitution if the proprietors of pocket-boroughs were to allow independence? No such thing, sir! But the fact is you have been coquetting with the Whigs—you have been endeavouring to sell yourself—they would not buy you at your own price—and now you wish to get back into my favour. Pledge yourself that henceforth you will fulfil your compacts—and I will pardon you."

"Your Grace is really too hard upon me," said Mr. Hyde, simpering and smiling, but unable to prevent himself from looking foolish. "It is astonishing how false rumours do get about—astonishing, 'pon my honour! However, as your Grace proposes to stretch forth the hand of friendship, pray suffer me to take it."

"And at the opening of the Session," observed Marchmont, "you will take the earliest opportunity to make such a speech as shall neutralize the evil effect of the one you delivered the other day to my voters at Viviandale?"

"Oh, certainly, my lord!" cried the honourable gentleman. "I will make a speech that shall put matters all to rights, 'pon my honour!"

"And I, Mr. Hyde, shall send you in good time a few strong sentences which you will take care to deliver against the Ministry. When I have leisure I will write down what I think you ought to say on the occasion——"

"Pray do so, my lord: I shall be delighted to profit by your Grace's inspirations! It is astonishing how keen is your Grace's perception—how shrewd your Grace's judgment in respect to the leading topics of the day—astonishing, 'pon my honour!'

Hereupon Mr. Fenwick Finnikin Hyde rose from his seat: the Duke's hand was now stretched out to him—the honourable gentleman pressed it with every appearance of enthusiastic devotion—and obsequiously bowed himself out.

"You will note down the heads of this conversation," said the Duke of Marchmont to Christian, when the door had closed behind the Member for Viviandale. "I am now going out; and when you have taken the notes I speak of, the remainder of the day is at your own disposal."

With these words the Duke of Marchmont quitted the library, leaving Christian in a state of no ordinary amazement at the scene which he had just witnessed. He had hitherto fancied that Great Britain was the freest country on the face of the earth, and that the House of Commons was composed of an independent set of men, honestly, fairly, and impartially representing the whole people. He had now learnt a lesson to the contrary; and he was astonished at the corruption of the system which allowed the Duke of Marchmont the control of those boroughs—enabling him to bestow them upon his own creatures. Not less was Christian surprised and disgusted at the abject servility with which one of those creatures had just abnegated all political independence, though faintly making a show to the contrary. When the young secretary had committed to paper the notes of the conversation at which he had been present, he issued forth to take a walk,—intending to call upon Christina.

He was proceeding through Hyde Park on his way towards Regent's Park, pondering on the character of the Duke of Marchmont—and in no very comfortable mood reflecting on the scene of the preceding night,—when he beheld a tall gentleman approaching. He was enveloped in a cloak; and Christian immediately knew him to be Mr. Redcliffe. The youth was walking slowly in one direction—Redcliffe was advancing as slowly from the other. The latter was evidently absorbed in thought, as was the former. The air was chill: his mantle was closely wrapped around him—the collar reached high up, indeed almost to his cheek-bones—and his hat was drawn somewhat over the upper part of his countenance. He did not at first see Christian, and was about to pass him: but the youth addressed Mr. Redcliffe in courteously becoming terms.

"Ah, I did not perceive you," said this gentleman; "and I am glad you spoke:"—at the same time he proffered the youth his hand. "It is a long while since we last met,"

"It is nearly ten weeks, sir," replied Christian.

"I recollect," observed Redcliffe. "It was when you and your sister had been performing a generous act of charity towards that poor creature——"

"Whose rapid pathway to the grave was smoothed by your bounties," added Christian, who experienced an illimitable admiration for the character of Mr. Redcliffe.

"And where are you living now?" inquired this gentleman, with his characteristic abruptness. "How is your amiable sister? I have thought of you both sometimes; and indeed have been going to ask Mrs. Macaulay concerning you—but something has always occurred to put it out of my head."

"I am grateful, sir," answered Christian, "to learn that my sister and myself have enjoyed your consideration. Christina is living with Lady Octavian Meredith——"

"Ah, then you no longer dwell together—you and your sister?" exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, now surveying the youth with an increasing interest.

"No, sir; circumstances compelled us to separate. We have to earn our own living: but, thank heaven! my sister is comfortably provided for."

"And you?" asked Redcliffe.

"I am for the present private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont," responded Christian.

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe: and then he hastily observed, "But why do you speak as if your sister *only* was comfortably situated, and *you* were not? Is it because you feel your present position to be a mere temporary one?"

"Yes, sir: for that and another reason——"

But then Christian stopped short, sorry even that he had said so much.

"Has the Duke of Marchmont cause to be dissatisfied with you? has he given you notice to leave him?"

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Christian, speaking with a sort of ardour, in the consciousness that he was giving complete satisfaction to his ducal employer, and that the tenure of his office depended entirely upon himself.

"Perhaps you are dissatisfied with your situation?" said Mr. Redcliffe inquiringly: and Christian perceived that his dark eyes were fixed keenly upon him.

"Frankly speaking, sir," responded the youth, "I am not well pleased with the post which I occupy: and though for a time I may keep it——"

But here again he stopped suddenly short, as the idea flashed to him that possibly Mr. Redcliffe might be acquainted with the Duke—in which case it would be the height of imprudence for him (Christian) to enter into any explanations with regard to the point whereon he had begun to touch.

"You need not be afraid to speak frankly and candidly to me," observed Redcliffe, who seemed at once to fathom the motive of the youth's hesitation. "I have not the slightest acquaintance with the Duke of Marchmont; and even if it were otherwise, I should not betray anything that you might in confidence reveal to me. I experience an interest in you; and if you think fit to regard me as a friend, you shall find me deserving of the title. If I remember right I have learnt that you and your sister are twins, and that you are orphans: your own words just now gave me to understand that you are both dependent on yourselves for your support. In this case you may need the advice of a friend, even if at the moment you require no more substantial succour: but both should be cheerfully given by me."

Christian expressed his gratitude for these assurances; and he experienced a profound pleasure at thus becoming the object of proffered friendship on the part of one whose character he already so much admired.

"Think not, young gentleman," continued Mr. Redcliffe, "that I am inspired by any impertinent curiosity in seeking your confidence——"

"Oh, no, sir! Not for a moment," exclaimed Christian, "could I entertain an idea so injurious towards you!"

"Listen," proceeded Redcliffe. "A youth of your age—thrown upon his own resources, and abroad as it were in the wide world—must inevitably on various occasions need suitable counsel and advice from older and more experienced heads. If I err not, you are at this present moment in some such position. Your sister is well provided for—and I rejoice to hear it: but you yourself appear to be less satisfactorily situated. In a word, you are not happy at the Duke of Marchmont's: or else something has occurred——"

"Something *has* indeed occurred," said Christian, in a mournful voice: and after a few instants' reflection, he added slowly and thoughtfully, "Yes—I do indeed require the counsel of some one who is enabled to give it. I feel that I am placed in a situation of considerable embarrassment—that I have a duty to perform towards an innocent lady whose destruction is resolved upon—but yet that in the performance of this duty I must play the hypocrite——"

"All this, Christian Ashton, is most serious," observed Mr. Redcliffe. "Let us walk to a more secluded place where we can converse together. I see that you will give me your confidence; and again I assure you that you shall never repent it."

Mr. Redcliffe and the youth diverged away together from the neighbourhood of Park Lane where their encounter had taken place; and they rambled slowly across the wide open field of the Park. During this walk Christian explained to Mr. Redcliffe how he had happened to fall asleep in the library on the preceding night—how he had overheard the conversation between the Duke of Marchmont and the Hon. Mr. Stanhope—how, after serious deliberation with himself, he had resolved to dissemble his looks in the presence of his Grace, and retain his situation in the hope of frustrating the diabolical scheme which had been initiated against the Duchess—but how when once this object should have been achieved, he was determined to seek his livelihood elsewhere.

Mr. Redcliffe listened in profound silence. He spoke not a single syllable throughout Christian's narrative: he walked slowly by the youth's side, with his eyes bent down;—and when the tale was ended, upwards of a minute elapsed ere he breathed a word of comment.

"This is indeed most serious," at length observed Mr. Redcliffe, speaking slowly and deliberately, and also in subdued accents. "The views which you have entertained in connexion therewith, are all just and intelligent. You cannot proclaim the conspiracy aloud to the world: for the world would not believe you—while its laws would punish you as a slanderer and a calumniator. You cannot—at least for the present—warn the Duchess of Marchmont of her danger: or at all events it must not be done by words from *your* lips. Yet you must remain in your present situation—you must keep a strict watch, upon all the Duke of Marchmont's proceedings——yes, *all* of them. You must not hesitate—with false compunctions or over-nice scruples—to listen, when opportunity serves, to conversations between the Duke and his villanous accomplice Stanhope. Everything that comes to your knowledge, must you report to me; and in me shall you find a faithful adviser as well as a sincere friend. Henceforth you will regard me as such; and you must never hesitate to seek my abode, no matter how often or at what hour. You possess feelings, Christian Ashton, which do you honour; and I experience a lively interest in your welfare. You need have no care for the future: for when the time shall come that you must leave a service which is evidently distasteful to you, it shall be my care and my pleasure to procure you another and a better situation. Farewell for the present."

With these words Mr. Redcliffe grasped Christian's hand cordially; and they separated. The youth felt infinitely relieved at having made a confidant of one in whom he had also found a friend; and he proceeded with a much lighter heart towards the Regent's Park. He saw his sister; and affectionate was the embrace in which the twins held each other. Christian mentioned the circumstance of his being already aware that Lord Octavian and Mr. Percival were one and the same person; and Christina frankly told him all the conversation which had taken place between herself and his lordship on the preceding day,—thus describing the motives which had induced her to conceal from Zoe the fact that she was previously acquainted with Octavian. Christian fully appreciated those motives, and expressed his belief that his sister had acted as she was bound to do under the circumstances. Christina then remarked that the Duke of Marchmont had called on the preceding day,—adding, "He seems a very nice nobleman, and spoke in kind terms of you."

Christian had already made up his mind not to reveal to his sister those circumstances of which he had been speaking to Mr. Redcliffe: for he knew full well that Christina would only be afflicted at the thought of her brother being compelled to remain in a position which was distasteful to him. That observation of her's, so artlessly eulogistic of the Duke, would have thrown Christian into considerable embarrassment, had not Zoe at the moment entered the room where this interview was taking place; and she welcomed the youth to the house in the most cordial manner. He walked out with his sister for an hour or two in the Regent's Park, and then returned to Belgrave Square.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CRIME.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of that day of which we have been writing in the preceding chapter, that three persons were advancing in three different directions towards the goldbeater's house in the midst of that maze of buildings lying between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. One of those individuals was Barney the Burker—the second was Bill Scott—the third was his brother Tim. The two lads had been informed by Barnes that if they joined him at the Smedleys', they would probably be able to render some little assistance in a particular business which was then in hand: but beyond these few words the Burker gave no special explanations.

The night was dark and cold,—not with the fine frosty weather which properly belonged to that December season of the year—but with a raw mistiness that damped the garments and collected on the hair and whiskers. It was an evening when those who were well clad would wrap their upper coats or their shawls, as the case might be, more closely around them—and when the scantily apparelled and the ragged children of poverty would hurry on with a continuous shivering of the frame which no acceleration of speed could however mitigate. Even the very baked-potato man would shudder visibly as he bawled out "All hot!" in a lustier voice than usual; and there was no need for naked-footed mendicants to affect a quivering misery of the form as they huddled up in door-ways or hung upon the track of passers-by, imploring alms; for the reality of their half-perished state was keen enough. The street-lamps appeared to burn mistily: and the jets of gas at the butchers' shops and the coal sheds threw forth a less vivid glare than usual. Barney the Burker raised the collar of his coat over his ears, and pulled his greasy comforter up to his lips,—at the same time diving both his hands into the capacious pockets of his coat, as he sped briskly along. The Scotts respectively pursued their own shivering ways, without the advantage of either upper coat or comforter: for the good luck which they had experienced in their predatory exploits the evening but one before, had led to no improvement of their costume, inasmuch as Barney the Burker purposely kept them in this impoverished and half-ragged state that they might have the appearance of mendicants and thus all the more easily conduct their operations on the pockets of the unwary.

Barney was the first to reach the Smedleys' house, which he entered by means of the alley leading by the side of the chapel; and in a few minutes he was followed by the elder Scott. At the expiration of a few more minutes the younger lad joined them; and they were all three soon seated in the scullery in company with the Smedleys and Mrs. Webber. Liquor and glasses were upon the table; and supplies of hot grog were mixed, while the conversation commenced.

"Well, so nuffin was done yesterday?" said the Burker, after a few indifferent remarks had been exchanged. "I should have looked down last night accordin' to appintment, if it hadn't been for the message you, Jack, sent to the contrairy by Tim Scott when you happened to meet him."

"Don't you remember," said Mrs. Smedley, "it was agreed upon we should get hold of that letter which Mr. Smith was going to send off——"

"Aye, to be sure," remarked the Burker: "and so I suppose he didn't send no letter at all?"

"Not yesterday," replied Mrs. Smedley: "he said he should put it off till to-day."

"And he was in a worse tremble than ever when he said so," added the old mother.

"Quite narvous—eh?" said the Burker; and then he took a long draught of spirits-and-water. "There's nothing like this for the narves; and I do raly think that a genelman could go as a genelman ought to Tuck up Fair, and cut his last fling in an exceedin' dashin' style, if he was only well primed with lush. But come—what about this here letter?"

"It's nothing particular after all," said Jack Smedley. "But here it is——No, you have got it, Bab; and you can let Barney read it for himself."

"If the writing's at all queer," responded the Burker, "it's of no more use to ask me to read it, than to tell a pig to dance a hornpipe on stilts. My larning might all be put into a thimble, and then leave room for the young lady which is accustomed to use it to put her forefinger in."

"Well, the writing isn't so trembling and shaky as one might expect to find it," said Bab Smedley; "and so you may read it for yourself."

With these words, she drew forth the intercepted letter, which she handed to Barney the Burker, who, having imbibed another draught from his tumbler, proceeded to peruse it in a cool and deliberate manner.

"No—there's nuffin here that's of any consequence to us," he observed, when he reached the end; "and so I suppose I may just as well light a pipe with it."

"No such thing," exclaimed Bab, snatching the letter out of the fellow's hand. "I mean to keep it—I have a fancy for doing so. Who knows but what some day or another it may be of use?"

"Ah, well—do just as you like," said the Burker: "but of course you don't mean to seal up the letter again and deliver it to-morrow morning at the place it's directed to?"

"Not quite such a fool!" rejoined Mrs. Smedley.

"To be sure not!" observed Barnes: "for him or her who took it to the house might be knowed again on any future occasion by the servant, or by them to which it is addressed; and then if any stir was made about the disappearance of a partickler individual——though by the bye, he doesn't give no name and no address in that there letter——"

"But he says enough," cried Jack Smedley, "to prove that he has been a jolly rogue in his way."

"How would it be," asked Mrs. Webber, "to make free with his purse before his very face—take it in a bold manner, I mean, and tell him to do his worst, for that we have found out all about him——"

"No," interrupted Bab Smedley; "that will not do. How do we know that he has really done sufficient to make him so terribly afraid of the law as we may think that he has? It is little better than surmise on our part: for that letter doesn't prove much, and is so vague."

"No, no, ma'am," said the Burker, addressing himself to Mrs. Webber; "it would never do to go on a mere wentur'. Whatsumever this Smith may have done, the loss of his purse might make him uproarious, raise the neighbourhood, and send us all to limbo. The work must be done in quite another way."

"To be sure," said Bab Smedley, after a little reflection: "Barney is right. Smith may have been, and no doubt is, a great rogue——"

"And so let him be punished for his vickedness!" interjected the Burker: then fixing his horrible eyes upon Bab Smedley, whom he evidently regarded as the supreme authority in that house, he said, "Well, I s'pose your mind's made up, and it's for to-night?"

"It must be for to-night if it is to be at all," responded Bab: "for he said he was going away to-morrow."

"And I am sure he will too, if he is alive to do it," said Mrs. Webber: "for he was packing up his few things in his carpet-bag when I went to his room with the supper-tray just now."

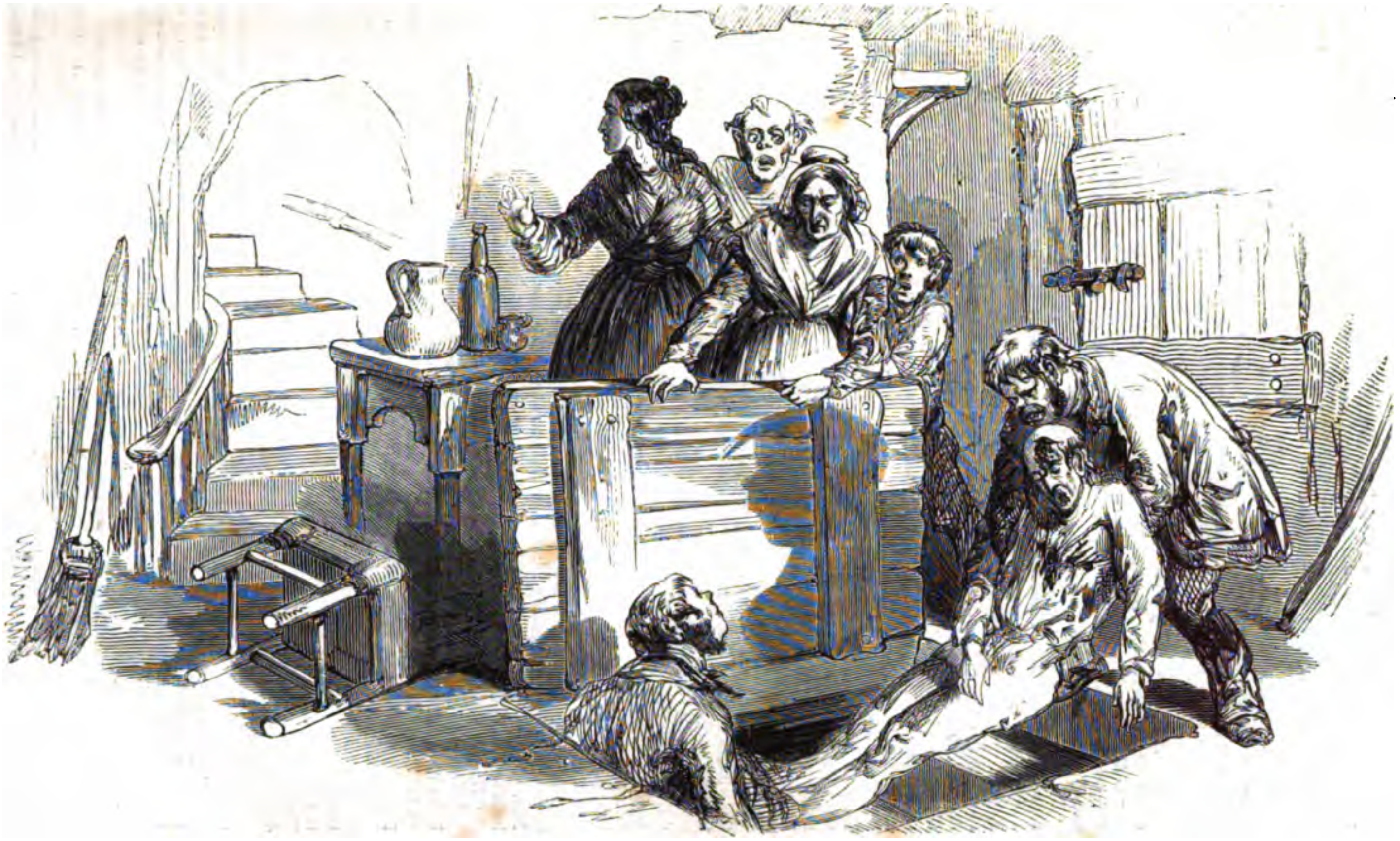
"Now then, you two fellers," said the Burker, as he filled himself another glass and thus addressed the Scotts, "you've already got to thank me for having done a blessed sight more to keep you on with your edication than ever your own parents would have done if they was alive to take care of yer. And so as you've got on so well in what one may call the rudiments of your larnin', I'm going to put you up into a higher class to-night and teach you another lesson. That was the reason I told you to come here on this partiklar occasion; and p'raps it is as well that there should be as much help as possible."

The two lads said not a word; but they seemed to have a perfect idea that some darker and deeper wickedness than any they had been yet acquainted with, was about to be perpetrated. Bill Scott's large goggle eyes stared in a sort of glassy admiration upon the Burker, whom he evidently regarded as a very fine fellow; while his brother Tim leered with a horrible knowingness upon the same individual,—thus not merely indicating that he comprehended the nature of the deed that was to be done, but that he was all too ready to bear a part in it.

The Burker and Bab Smedley conversed together for some minutes in whispers: then whispered remarks were also interchanged betwixt them, the woman's husband and her mother; and in a short time the plan of proceeding was duly settled. Soon afterwards—it being now about half-past ten o'clock—Mrs. Webber lighted a chamber-candle, and quitted the scullery. In a few minutes she returned: and having carefully closed the door, she observed, "I have been up to ask him if he wants anything more: he says no, for that he is going to bed."

"And you didn't tell him," asked the Burker, with a horrible grin, "that you had some friends here which would presently bring him up his gruel?"

"He told me to call him early," continued the old woman, not heeding the interjected remark which



was so replete with a revolting levity in its allusion to the dreadful crime that had been determined upon. "I asked him at what hour; and he said at six o'clock, as he wanted to get off before daylight;—for now that his mind was made up for departure, he says, he has a very great way to go."

"His departur', I rayther think," said Barnes, pursuing his vein of hideous, horrible jocularity, "will take place sooner than he suspects; and the way he has to go will be a precious deal longer than he has bargained for."

"He says he is going upon the Continent," added Mrs. Webber.

"Well, if he likes to give that there name to the place where old Nick lives, he is werry welcome," observed Barney.

"I left him—and he locked the door, as he always does," said Mrs. Webber.

"I've got my tools with me," exclaimed the Burker. "There's as tidy a lot of skellingtons as ever was seen!"—and as he thus spoke, he produced an old cotton pocket-handkerchief in which the skeleton keys thus alluded to were so wrapped up as to prevent them from rattling or chinking as he walked.

"I am afraid your tools will be of no good, Barney," said Mrs. Webber; "for the lodger always leaves the key in the lock. The door must not be forced open with any degree of violence: he would raise the whole neighbourhood with his cries and yells in no time."

"What should prevent us from getting in at the window?" asked Jack Smedley. "It looks on the back yard——"

"Winders be hanged!" ejaculated the Burker. "If he sleeps light, he would be sure and hear the noise of the winder lifting up: and if so be it's fastened, there's the chance of smashing the glass in cutting out a hole with the glazier's di'mond to thrust one's fist in and unfasten it. No, no—that's not the dodge. Don't be afeard, ma'am," continued the ruffian, addressing himself specially to Mrs. Webber, "I'll soon have the key out of the lock, and no mistake."

"How?" inquired Jack Smedley.

"Never do you mind: you'll see all about it byme bye. But we must do nuffin for an hour or so, till the covy's fast locked in the arms of Murphy. So now for a booze and blowing a cloud."

An hour and a half were passed in drinking on the part of all, combined with smoking on that of the male portion of the miscreant gang; and when the kitchen clock had proclaimed midnight, the Burker knocked the ashes out of his pipe and drained his glass.

"Now for business," he said, rising from his seat. "Come, Jack—you will go along with me: so let's take off our boots. You," he added, turning to Mrs. Smedley, "must come to hold the candle. You, ma'am—and you two lads—must wait down here till you're wanted?"

Barney and Jack Smedley took off their boots; and Mrs. Smedley, with the chamber-candle in her hand, led the way from the scullery. Noiselessly and cautiously did the three wretches ascend to the first floor—the old woman and the two lads remaining below. With such stealthiness did the Burker and the Smedleys mount the stairs, that not a board creaked; and Bab was careful that her garments should not even rustle against the wall. On reaching the landing, the Burker bade Mrs. Smedley hold the candle near the key-hole, but so shade it with her hand that the light should not penetrate through into the chamber. He then applied his ear to the key-hole, and listened with breathless attention. Perhaps a person less experienced than the ruffian was in such matters, would scarcely have succeeded in ascertaining that the inmate of the chamber slept: but Barney had made all these sorts of things a particular study—and there was no detail requisite for the working out of a successful iniquity, which he had not carefully practised. Slowly withdrawing his head from the vicinage of the key-hole at the expiration of a minute, he gave his accomplices to understand by a significant nod that their intended victim slept. Yes—he slept at the midnight hour, when the ruthless miscreants were bent upon his destruction!

The key, as Mrs. Webber had represented, was in the lock; and Barney now ascertained that it was turned round in such a way that it could not be pushed straight into the room, even if he had entertained the notion of adopting a course which by being certain to make it fall on the boards within, would stand the chance of startling the lodger. The end of the key projected out a very little way from the hole, on the exterior side of the door; and the Burker, having directed Bab to hold the light in a particular manner, proceeded with his operations. He drew forth from his pocket a stout piece of wire; and this he fastened round the end of the key. It was now easy to turn the key in such a way that it could be thrust out of the lock on the inner side of the door; while the wire not merely prevented it from falling on the boards, but likewise held it pendent at a sufficient distance from the door itself so as to preclude the possibility of its knocking against the panels. A skeleton key was now introduced into the lock thus skilfully cleared; and in a few minutes the door was opened.

Barney made a sign for Bab to stand back, so that not a single gleam of light should penetrate into the room; and again he listened attentively. All of a sudden he closed the door, and made another sign, to indicate that the lodger was awakening. A panic-terror seized upon Jack Smedley; and clutching the Burker with one hand, and his wife with the other, he endeavoured to drag them both away from the spot. Bab herself was irresolute how to act: the Burker, ferociously determined, shook Smedley off, and made fierce gesticulations to the effect that the work *must* be finished, for that they had gone too far to recede. But Jack Smedley was no longer master of himself: he was trembling all over—his countenance was as pale as death—and the infection of his own terrors was being rapidly communicated to his wife. The Burker continued to gesticulate in a menacing manner; and his looks denoted supreme disgust and contempt for Jack Smedley.

"No, no! the whole neighbourhood will be alarmed!" whispered this individual, as he once more clutched the Burker by the arm.

"Ah! what's this?" cried a voice from within, at the same instant that the handle of the door was heard to turn; and the key pendent to the wire, knocked against the panel.

Barney dashed the door violently open; and a heavy fall was heard, instantaneously followed by a cry for help. Then the Burker dealt a tremendous blow with the butt-end of a pistol which he snatched forth from his pocket; and Bab Smedley, suddenly recalling all her courage, rushed in with the light. The lodger lay upon the floor, low moans escaping from his lips: but those quickly ceased, as the remorseless Burker dealt him another terrific blow with his weapon—a blow which beat in the unfortunate victim's forehead. It was done—the murder was accomplished—and that victim was no more!

It was evident that being disturbed by the noise at the door, he had got out of bed to ascertain what was the matter—he had huddled on his pantaloons—and he was about to open the door to listen whether all was quiet, or whether there were indeed anything wrong going on in the house,—when the circumstance of his hand encountering the wire and the key had confirmed his terror and had caused an ejaculation to fall from his lips. There he now lay upon the floor—a corpse, with his forehead battered in!

"Come, you fool," said Bab Smedley to her husband; "don't stand like a coward there——"

"No coward, Bab! *That* feeling is gone," interrupted Jack, whose courage now likewise returned, the fear of danger being suddenly passed. "Let's look after the swag."

"Aye, that's it," said the Burker, "and dispose of the stiff'un arterwards. Well, the job was done neat enough arter all; though I tell you what, Master Jack, no thanks to you if we didn't make a mess of the whole affair. You and me has done two or three things in our life-time; but I never see you get so chicken-hearted afore."

"It wasn't the thing itself I was afraid of," answered Smedley, by no means relishing these taunts: "it was the fear of having the whole neighbourhood roused."

"And so you would, if it hadn't been for me," rejoined the Burker in a savage tone. "Howsumever, it's all over now——Ah, and here's the blunt!"

For while the ruffian was giving utterance to those words, he stooped down and felt in the pockets of the murdered man's pantaloons. He drew forth two purses; and a hasty examination of the contents showed him that though one contained but a trifle of money, the contents of the other amounted to about five hundred pounds. This was an infinitely greater treasure than any of the wretches expected to acquire by their deed of turpitude; and their spirits rose to the highest point of horrible exultation.

"Now let Mrs. Webber come and mop up them boards at vunce," said the Burker; "or else there'll be marks on 'em as will tell tales. And you, Bab, can stop with the lads to get the trap-door up, while me and Jack brings down the stiff'un. The sooner all's put to rights the better."

Mrs. Smedley, placing the light upon a chest of drawers, hastily descended the stairs; and in a few minutes the old woman made her appearance in the chamber, with a pail of hot water and a flannel. But little blood had flowed on the floor; and none had reached the carpet, of which there was only a slip by the side of the bed. The vile woman showed no more feeling than that which a slight shudder expressed, as her first glance was flung upon the corpse; and this arose merely from a swiftly transient sense of recoil from the spectacle of the battered forehead—but certainly not from any compunction at the atrocious deed itself. The floor was soon cleansed with the flannel; and then, as the old woman held the light, the Burker and Jack Smedley, raising the body between them, began to carry it down the stairs.

The scullery was reached; and now the two lads for the first time looked upon a form whence murder had expelled the breath of life!—for the first time did they behold a corpse which was made so by the black turpitude of assassination! An instant—and only for an instant—did they shrink back from the spectacle: a moment too—and only for a moment—did their minds appear to receive a shock; and then their brutal, savage self-possession was regained: the fierceness of their instincts appeared to triumph over any latent glimmering of their better feelings. The Burker contemplated them both from the corners of his eyes: he saw full well what was passing within them; and a devilish expression of satisfaction appeared upon his hideous countenance, as he felt that they were now more than ever bound fast in the trammels which he had cast around them, and by means of which he rendered them ductile and pliant to all his purposes of evil.

The table was moved away from the middle of the scullery—the square piece of carpet on which it was wont to stand, was likewise taken up—and a trap-door was raised. This trap-door revealed a considerable aperture: it was the mouth of a pit, whence a disagreeable earthy smell came up. There were steps leading down into the abyss; and to that depth was the corpse conveyed by Barney the Burker and Jack Smedley. The two women and the two lads stood close by the trap-door, gazing upon the scene which the light of the candle illuminated with a sufficiency to throw out its most hideous and ghastly features. And horrible indeed was that scene,—horrible the face of the miscreant Burker, bending over the rigid and blood-stained countenance of the murdered man—that countenance, too, on the upper part of which there appeared so frightful a wound!

"Hush," said Bab Smedley, suddenly breaking the silence which prevailed. "I do believe there is some one in the passage up-stairs!"

"Nonsense!" growled the Burker: "if all the doors is shut, how can there be any one in the house? And if there is, we'll sarve him as we've done the stiff'un here."

"Do be quiet!" whispered Mrs. Smedley with affrighted impatience. "I am certain there *are* footsteps!"

The woman spoke so confidently that all did now remain perfectly quiet, with suspended breath: but no sound met their ears—and Mrs. Smedley yielded to the conclusion that it was only fancy on her part. But all of a sudden there was a strange rushing noise in the passage above: the body fell from the Burker's grasp—and Jack Smedley, who was lower down the steps, sustaining the feet of the murdered man, fell backward with considerable violence, the corpse rolling upon him. It was in the bottom of the vault that this horrible incident took place; and a cry of terror ascended from that depth. Then the next moment the gold-beater was seen rushing up the steps as if he were demented—his hair standing on end—his countenance ghastly pale—his lips white—his eyes rolling with horror.

"You fool, you!" muttered his wife, clutching him violently by the arm, and giving him a savage shake: "you'll make yourself heard yet before you have done!"

It must be observed that Barney the Burker had not let the corpse fall through any access of panic-terror—but merely that he might rush upstairs and ascertain the cause of that strange sweeping sound which had reached the ears of those in the scullery. But on opening the door and listening, he found that all was still.

"Give me a light," he said, "and I'll go over the house just for your saytisfaction: cos why, none of you seem able to do it for yourselves."

A candle was immediately supplied him by one of the lads; and the instant he appeared in the ground-floor passage with that light, the rushing sound was heard again—and an enormous cat which had been crouching on the mat, sprang up the stairs to the higher storeys. The Burker gave a chuckling laugh; and descending to the scullery, closed the door, saying, "It's on'y a great big black cat that's got into the house."

"It's the people's at the beer-shop," exclaimed Bab Smedley.

"But isn't it strange," asked the gold-beater, who was shuddering all over, "that the brute should cut about the house like that? Doesn't it seem as if it knew what had been done?"—and with his haggard eyes he glanced towards the mouth of the vault.

"Well, I des say there's summut like instink in the affair," said the Burker coolly: "but as cats can't speak, they can't tell no tales—and so we needn't bother ourselves any more about the matter. Come, Jack, take a drop of brandy; and don't make such a fool of yourself as you seem to be doing. Why, I can't make out what's come over you all on a sudden, that you have got so precious chicken-hearted. It isn't a werry good example you're setting them lads. Where's the quicklime?"

"All ready down below," responded Bab Smedley: then addressing herself to her husband, she said savagely, "There, toss off that brandy, and be a man! I'm ashamed of you!"

The gold-beater drank the raw spirit which his wife handed him; and his courage speedily revived again.

"Come now, my boys, and lend a hand below," said the Burker: "you must 'custom yerselves to get familiar with stiff 'uns. You come too, Jack."

The gold-beater and the Burker descended into the vault, with a candle—the two Scotts following with readiness and alacrity. A spade and pickaxe were in the pit—a hole was speedily dug, sufficiently large to receive the corpse—a quantity of quicklime was thrown upon it—the earth was shovelled back—it was well flattened down, so as to make the bottom of the subterranean level—and thus the work was accomplished.

The trap-door was closed—the carpet was drawn over it—the table was restored to its place—quantities of spirits-and-water were mixed—and the wretches caroused above the spot to which their victim had been consigned. The Burker and Bab Smedley ascended to the chamber where the deed was accomplished: they ransacked the contents of the carpet-bag—but they found no papers of any kind—no farther hoard of money. But on the drawers was a very handsome repeater-watch, together with a gold pencil-case and two or three rings. These valuables were of course taken possession of; and the two wretches descended to rejoin their companions. A division of the booty now took place—more grog was drunk—and it was past two in the morning when the Burker and the Scotts took their departure, at intervals of a few minutes, by means of the back part of the premises and the narrow alley by the side of the chapel.

"You behaved like a fool to-night," said Bab Smedley to her husband, when they were at length alone together in their own chamber.

"I can't tell what it was that came over me when we were all three together at *his* door," said the gold-beater. "And then the affair in the vault was horrible enough! To have that corpse come tumbling down upon one was sufficient to make the hair stand on end. And mind you, Bab—*you* were not altogether yourself to-night: *you* were frightened up at the door—and you were frightened again too by the noise of that cursed cat."

"Well, there's enough of it!" said the woman sharply: for her husband had spoken truly, and she herself had been more accessible to terror on this particular night than on the occasion of any previous deed of iniquity.

"I tell you what, Bab," said the gold-beater, looking somewhat nervously around the room, and speaking in the half-hushed voice which denoted a certain inward appalled feeling: "I don't like that affair of the cat—there was something superstitious in it—it was the animal's instinct!"

"Now, *will* you have done?" demanded Bab Smedley, turning with sudden fierceness round upon her husband: but her own face was as ghastly pale as his was—and as their eyes met he saw that she was under the same superstitious terror as that which was awing and appalling his own soul.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LISTENER.

A WEEK had elapsed since the occurrences just related; and during this interval the Hon. Wilson Stanhope had called three or four times, and had dined twice at Marchmont House.

He was a man of about five-and-thirty years of age—handsome, though with a somewhat dissipated and rakish look. He had been for some years in the Horse Guards; and although his necessities had compelled him to sell his commission, he still affected to a certain degree a military appearance: that is to say, he continued to wear his moustache. His features were regular, but somewhat bold and prominent: the expression of his countenance was decidedly sensuous. His hair was light: his eyes were large, and had a look of bold hardihood when contemplating females,—thus indicating the thorough libertine. Though of profligate habits—a confirmed gamester—a spendthrift—and an unprincipled seducer, yet he had done nothing to cause his expulsion from fashionable society. A man may cheat a thousand creditors if they be only tradesmen, without losing his caste: but if he fail to pay a single debt contracted on the race-course or at the gaming-table, he at once forfeits his rank and consideration as a gentleman. He may beguile credulous women by myriads of dishonourable artifices: and yet he can still hold his head high and proclaim himself an honourable man. But if he forfeit his word in the slightest degree to any individual in his own sphere, his honour is instantaneously considered as lost. Such are the usages, rules, and customs of the fashionable world; and therefore a man like Mr. Stanhope, though saturated with all vices, may continue to look everybody in the face, and no one will dream of excluding him from the sphere in which he moves.

Such was the individual who was leagued with the Duke of Marchmont to accomplish the destruction of the Duchess. During the week which had elapsed since the infamous compact was made, he had already been admitted to a footing of intimacy in the Duke's mansion; and the Duchess had received him with a becoming courtesy. She herself was ignorant of his profligate habits: she might perhaps have heard it whispered "that he was a little gay"—but though herself a thoroughly well principled and right-minded woman, she nevertheless knew that if she were to look coldly upon all the male portion of her visitors who bore a similar reputation to that of Mr. Stanhope, she would have to debar herself from society altogether. Besides, she was docile to the will of her husband: it was not in her nature to rebel against him: she was already unhappy enough on account of his neglect to be careful not to aggravate it into downright hatred—for she knew not the full extent of that feeling of bitterness which he entertained towards her. *His* friends became *her* friends: it was sufficient for Lavinia that her husband wished her to receive any particular individuals with cordiality, to ensure that hospitable welcome on her part;—and thus was she giving her hand to the villain who was secretly pledged to the accomplishment of her destruction.

In order that the reader may properly understand the scene which we are about to relate, it is necessary to give some little description of that cabinet which joined the library. It has already been described as a sort of slip, containing only one window, and commodious enough for a person to lounge in by himself, or for a couple of friends to indulge in a confidential chat or discuss a bottle of wine. It seemed to have been intended by the architect who built the mansion, to serve as a little retiring-room from the library itself: for in addition to the door opening from the passage, there was another door of communication between the cabinet and the library. But on taking possession of that mansion, the Duke of Marchmont had completely cut off the cabinet from the library, by having the door fastened up and book-shelves arranged against it in the library itself. The fact was, his Grace had purchased more books than the original conveniences of the library could well contain. Not that he himself had purposed at the time to plunge headlong into all those intellectual treasures: his reading was limited enough,—the newspapers and new novels, with perhaps a few political pamphlets and Parliamentary Blue Books, constituting the range thereof. Those quantities of volumes therefore, so elegantly bound, were bought for ornament and show,—just as were the vases which stood upon the landings, the specimens of sculpture on the staircases and in the passages, or the pictures which hung to the walls. He had purchased, then—as we have said—more books than could be conveniently stowed away in the cases originally provided for them; and not choosing to have them thrust into a cupboard or put anywhere out of sight, he had caused shelves to be arranged against the door opening into the cabinet.

Now, Christian had one day discovered, while sitting in the cabinet, that a conversation going on in the library could be overheard with very little difficulty by any one in the former place: that is to say, if such person chose to play the part of a regular eavesdropper and apply his ear to the door which was fastened up. Be it well understood that Christian would under ordinary circumstances have scorned to become a willing and wilful eavesdropper: but he had been counselled by Mr. Redcliffe to keep the strictest watch on the proceedings and conduct of the Duke of Marchmont—and this advice, under those circumstances which are known to the reader, he was resolved to follow out.

One forenoon—at the expiration of that week to which we have alluded—Christian was seated with the Duke of Marchmont in the library, when a domestic entered to announce that Mr. Armytage solicited an immediate interview with his Grace. Christian perceived a strong expression of vexation and annoyance pass over the Duke's countenance—an expression indeed which was so extraordinary that though it immediately passed away, it dwelt in the youth's mind. He of course knew that Mr. Armytage was Lady Octavian Meredith's father: he knew likewise that the Duke of Marchmont visited the Merediths; and he was therefore astonished that the announcement of the name of Zoe's sire should produce such an effect on his ducal employer. More than all this too, he had learnt from his sister, in the course of conversation, that Mr. Armytage was many years back a dependant of the Duke's in the form of land-steward, bailiff, or something of the kind—and that thence was the origin of his fortune. How was it, therefore, that his Grace should unwittingly evince such an antipathy to the mere mention of Mr. Armytage's name?

"You can retire," said the Duke to Christian when the servant had withdrawn to introduce Mr. Armytage. "There is no more correspondence requiring my attention to-day; and your time is therefore now your own."

Christian bowed and issued from the library: but he was irresistibly led to enter the cabinet, where upon the table lay two or three books which he had selected for perusal and which he had left there. It can be easily understood how, in the circumstances in which young Ashton was placed, everything that seemed at all mysterious or unaccountable in respect to the Duke of Marchmont should have become a matter of deep importance to himself. And then too the counsel he had received from Mr. Redcliffe was continuously uppermost in his mind—to keep a watch on all the Duke's proceedings, and to report everything to the said Clement Redcliffe. He had the highest confidence in this gentleman's sagacity and good intentions; and without at all foreseeing the means which Mr. Redcliffe might recommend for contravening the diabolical plot that was now in full progress against the honour and well-being of the Duchess, Christian felt assured that the more facts he could glean in respect to the Duke's proceedings, the greater would become the resources and the easier the plans by which Mr. Redcliffe would accomplish the salvation of the Duchess and the discomfiture of her foes. All these considerations decided Christian to listen to what was about to take place between Marchmont and Mr. Armytage.

"Your Grace will excuse me for intruding thus early upon your privacy," said Armytage, as he was ushered into the library: "but when I explain myself——"

"You don't mean to say," interrupted the Duke, "that you have any fresh favour to ask at my hands—any new demand to make upon me?"

"Indeed, my lord," replied Armytage, "I come to you for that purpose."

"And what is it?" asked the Duke. "Why, it is but six or seven months ago since I did all you required me in a certain matter"—thus significantly alluding to the impulse which he had given to the courtship of Octavian Meredith in respect to the beautiful Zoe.

"I am perfectly sensible, my lord," responded Armytage, "of all your great kindness on that occasion; and I can assure you that nothing but the sternest necessity would bring me hither as a suppliant for an additional proof of your generosity and friendship."

"On my soul, this language of your's, Armytage," said the Duke curtly, "is foreboding of a demand of no ordinary magnitude."

"It is an affair of magnitude to myself," rejoined Zoe's father,—"but of very trifling consideration to your Grace."

"Well, hasten and come to the point," said the Duke: "for I have business to attend to elsewhere."

"This, then, is the point, my lord," resumed Armytage: "I am in immediate need of fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand pounds?" echoed Marchmont: and his voice, to Christian's ears, sounded as if it were expressive of a perfect consternation.

"Nothing more nor less, my lord," responded Armytage, with a decisiveness which was far more astonishing to young Ashton.

"But this is ridiculous!" cried the Duke. "You—a rich man——"

"Have the kindness to hear me, my lord," interrupted the speculator. "Some three months back—or nearly so—a certain person in whom I had the utmost faith, decamped suddenly, leaving his own affairs in such a frightful condition that a *fiat* of bankruptcy was issued against him. He has not surrendered to that *fiat*: indeed he has never since been heard of: and so completely ruined was he—or else so effectually did he realise his available funds, and thereby defraud his creditors—that there is not a shilling in the pound to divide amongst them. But this is not all. He committed forgeries to the amount of thirty thousand pounds; and unfortunately all those forged bills have passed through my hands. My name is upon them: they will be due to-morrow—and the holders will look to me for the liquidation thereof. But in addition to those forged bills, I am a sufferer to the extent of an additional twenty thousand pounds by this Mr. Preston——"

"Preston—Preston?" said the Duke, in a musing tone. "What—he who lived——"

"Not far from me, in the Regent's Park."

"Ah, to be sure. The Ashtons——"

"I know it, my lord," said Armytage. "That young lady who is staying with my daughter—and her brother, who is in your lordship's household—suffered in some way or another by that man's flight."

"And is it possible that *you* are really hampered?" demanded the Duke in a tone of voice which showed how little agreeable to him was Armytage's request for a loan.

"I have told your Grace precisely how I am situated," replied Mr. Armytage: "and every moment that we expend in conversation, is so much time unnecessarily thrown away."

"But fifty thousand pounds!" said the Duke: "it is an enormous sum. I do not exceed my income—but I live close up to it—and positively I cannot lay my hands at a moment's warning on a quarter of that amount. Indeed I question whether I have ten thousand at my banker's at this present instant."

"The Duke of Marchmont's name is good at his bankers' for one hundred thousand, if that were all," responded Armytage, with the tone of a man who was by no means inclined to take a refusal, nor to hear difficulties started without overruling them.

"Yes: but one does not always like to borrow of one's banker," continued the Duke.

"Then I will introduce your Grace to a person in the City——"

"What! a money-lender?" ejaculated Marchmont, as if in deep indignation and disgust.

"I do not think," responded Armytage, "that it would be the first time your lordship had come in contact with usurers. When simply Lord Clandon——"

"Enough, Travers—enough!" exclaimed the Duke, sternly and curtly.

"Ah, my lord!" quickly interjected Armytage: "you have let slip a name which I have long ceased to bear."

"Did I?—I noticed it not," said the Duke. "But really, my dear Armytage, you must raise this money in some other way——"

"Impossible, my lord! I cannot do it with my own resources. If *I* went to a money-lender to ask for a loan on my own account, it would be whispered abroad, and I should be ruined. But if your Grace will not borrow of your banker, and if you also have an insuperable objection against applying to a usurer, you may give me your bill or your bond: and with such a security I can at once obtain the funds I require."

"And about the repayment?" asked the Duke.

"Consider, Armytage—fifty thousand pounds is no small debt to contract."

"I am aware of it," responded Zoe's father: "but I have no fear in respect to my ability to refund it in due time. I have numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of the year——"

"Then wherefore not render those securities available for your purpose?" ejaculated Marchmont, clutching greedily at the idea which he hoped might save him from having to yield to Armytage's demand.

"Because, my lord," was the reply, "if I were to part with those securities, I should lose my clients. The money-lenders into whose hands they fall, would take away my patrons from me."

"But really, Travers——"

"That name again!" ejaculated Armytage.

"Well, well—you have yourself to blame for it, inasmuch as you ere now recalled those times when you bore that name, and when you were very differently situated from what you are now. Consider all I have done for you——"

"In one word, my lord," interrupted Armytage, "am I to have this money? or am I not?"

"And if I say that I cannot possibly accommodate you?" inquired the Duke.

"Then I am a ruined man—and I blow my brains out," was the unhesitating rejoinder given by Zoe's father. "But, my lord, in such an extreme and frightful case," he added, in a voice so low that his words only just reached Christian's ears,—"I should not pass out of this world without leaving behind me a written history of my life, and all my experiences of whatsoever sort they may have been."

There was a long pause in the discourse; and it was at length broken by the Duke of Marchmont, who said, "At what time to-day must you have this money?"

"It should all be paid into my bankers' hands by five o'clock this evening," responded Armytage.

"It shall be there!" said the Duke: and almost immediately afterwards Zoe's father took his departure.

Christian instantaneously quitted the cabinet, for fear lest the Duke should happen to look into that room; and he at once ascended to his own chamber. There he sat down to reflect upon what he had heard. He was sorry that he had listened: remorseful feelings arose within him, inasmuch as none of the discourse which had thus reached his ears, bore the slightest reference to the horrible conspiracy in progress against the peace and reputation of the Duchess of Marchmont. Christian could not hide from himself the fact that he had done an unhandsome thing: in sooth, he was ashamed of his own conduct. He did not know whether to report all he had learnt to Mr. Redcliffe, or not. But still he thought that as he had in the first instance set himself to listen with a special object, he had better communicate the results to that gentleman. And this reflection led him on to another—which was that it was probable Mr. Redcliffe's plan of proceeding was to gain possession of some secrets in respect to the Duke, for the purpose of wielding them as a means for compelling him to do justice to the unfortunate Duchess.

"And if this be Mr. Redcliffe's aim," thought Christian to himself, "it is perhaps fortunate after all that I *did* listen to the conversation between his Grace and Mr. Armytage. I am fighting in a good cause and on the side of justice. The cause is that of an inoffensive, a virtuous, and an excellent lady, against whom the foulest of conspiracies has been set on foot; and all weapons which Mr. Redcliffe and myself may use to frustrate the odious scheme, are fair and legitimate."

These reflections cheered the youth's spirits; and immediately after dinner he repaired to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. He had never been there but once since he and Christina resigned their lodgings in the house; and that once was on the occasion when he and his sister called upon Mrs. Macaulay to inquire whether she could give them any advice towards extricating them from the difficulties wherein they were placed at the time.

Christian knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by Mrs. Macaulay in person: for she had seen him pass her parlour-window. Perceiving that he was well dressed and was evidently in comfortable circumstances, the prudent landlady gave him a hearty welcome,—which she could safely do, as his appearance relieved her of the idea that he was possibly coming to borrow money —in which case she had an excuse in readiness. She would have been extremely sorry—nothing would have given her greater pleasure—but she had only that very morning paid her rent—and what with this disbursement and her Christmas bills, she was drained quite dry. But fortunately Mrs. Macaulay was spared this tissue of falsehoods, inasmuch as Christian came for no money-hunting purpose whatsoever.

"And how *do* you do?" she exclaimed, shaking him by the hand: "and how is that dear sister of your's? I have often and often thought of you, and wondered why you never dropped in to take a friendly cup of tea. I had been thinking that I would call on Mrs. Giles to learn if you were still with her, and how you were getting on: but I have been so busy! For the rooms you used to occupy were let—immediately after you left—to an elderly couple. Though between you and me," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, and putting on a look of mysterious confidence, "they are no great shakes: for Mr. Johnson—that's the name—locks up his wine and brandy; and Mrs. Johnson never by any accident leaves the key in the tea-caddy. Now isn't *that* mean?"

While thus speaking, Mrs. Macaulay had led the way into her parlour; and Christian, in order to avoid the necessity of giving an answer to the question with which she had so indignantly concluded her speech, inquired if Mr. Redcliffe was at home.

"No—but he will be in almost directly," replied Mrs. Macaulay. "Do sit down and take a glass of wine."

"No, I thank you—not in the middle of the day."

"Well, and you are quite right," exclaimed the landlady. "Never drink wine in the middle of the day—I never do—unless it is at a neighbour's, or a lodger happens to leave a drop at the bottom of a bottle. Not that the Johnsons do! No—bless you! they even decant their Port down to the very dregs: and *that*, you know, is so excessively mean! But what do you want with Mr. Redcliffe?"

"I met him about a week ago," answered Christian; "and he desired me to call upon him."

"He is a very excellent man, though eccentric," resumed Mrs. Macaulay. "I never had a better lodger. Whatever is left cold, he seems entirely to forget; and never asks to have it up. Now *that* is what I like! His maxim is evidently, '*Live and let live*:'—and so it should be. He gives very little trouble, and is a man of the fewest possible words that I ever knew. He receives no visitors, and likes to be alone. The other evening it struck me that he might possibly be dull——I recollect I had nothing in the house for my own supper that particular evening—— However, that is not to the point. But at nine o'clock, when *his* supper-tray went up, I followed; and I said in the politest manner, 'Really, Mr. Redcliffe, I can't bear to know that you are always sitting alone; and I thought perhaps you would only deem it an act of courtesy if I just stepped up to have half-an-hour's chat with you.'—But no! he assured me that he preferred being alone, and that he could not think of taking me away from my own domestic avocations. Well, I was obliged to leave him to eat his supper all by himself; and it was so provoking!—for I had put on my best cap and gown on purpose, and had made myself look so smart! But isn't he an odd man?"

Christian could have said, if he had liked, that he really did not see anything so particularly odd in Mr. Redcliffe's conduct on the occasion referred to: but he did not choose to wound Mrs. Macaulay's feelings; and so he evaded the necessity of giving a direct reply by observing, "He is a very charitable and generous-hearted man."

"Perhaps then he has done something for you?" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay quickly.

"No—it was not necessary," rejoined Christian, —"at least not when I met him a week ago. Previously to then—as you are indeed somewhat aware—I and my poor sister had to encounter severe troubles: but the tide of ill fortune suddenly changed—and on the same day we both obtained situations—Christina as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith, and I as private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Dear me, dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay: "to think of your good luck! You had really better take a glass of wine after your walk—and a nice bit of cake? And if my lodgings should happen to become vacant, you will have such opportunities, you know, to recommend them to a Member of Parliament!—and you can speak an excellent word in my favour: for you recollect how good I always was to you both."

Christian certainly must have been troubled with a very short memory at the time: for he could not recollect any particular boon conferred upon himself and his sister by Mrs. Macaulay—unless indeed it were the recommendation to Mr. Samuel Emanuel, which however well-meant, had nevertheless entailed upon his sister nothing but insult. As she continued to press the refreshment of wine and cake—both, be it understood, having descended from Mr. Redcliffe's apartments—he again declined the offer, but with a becoming courtesy.

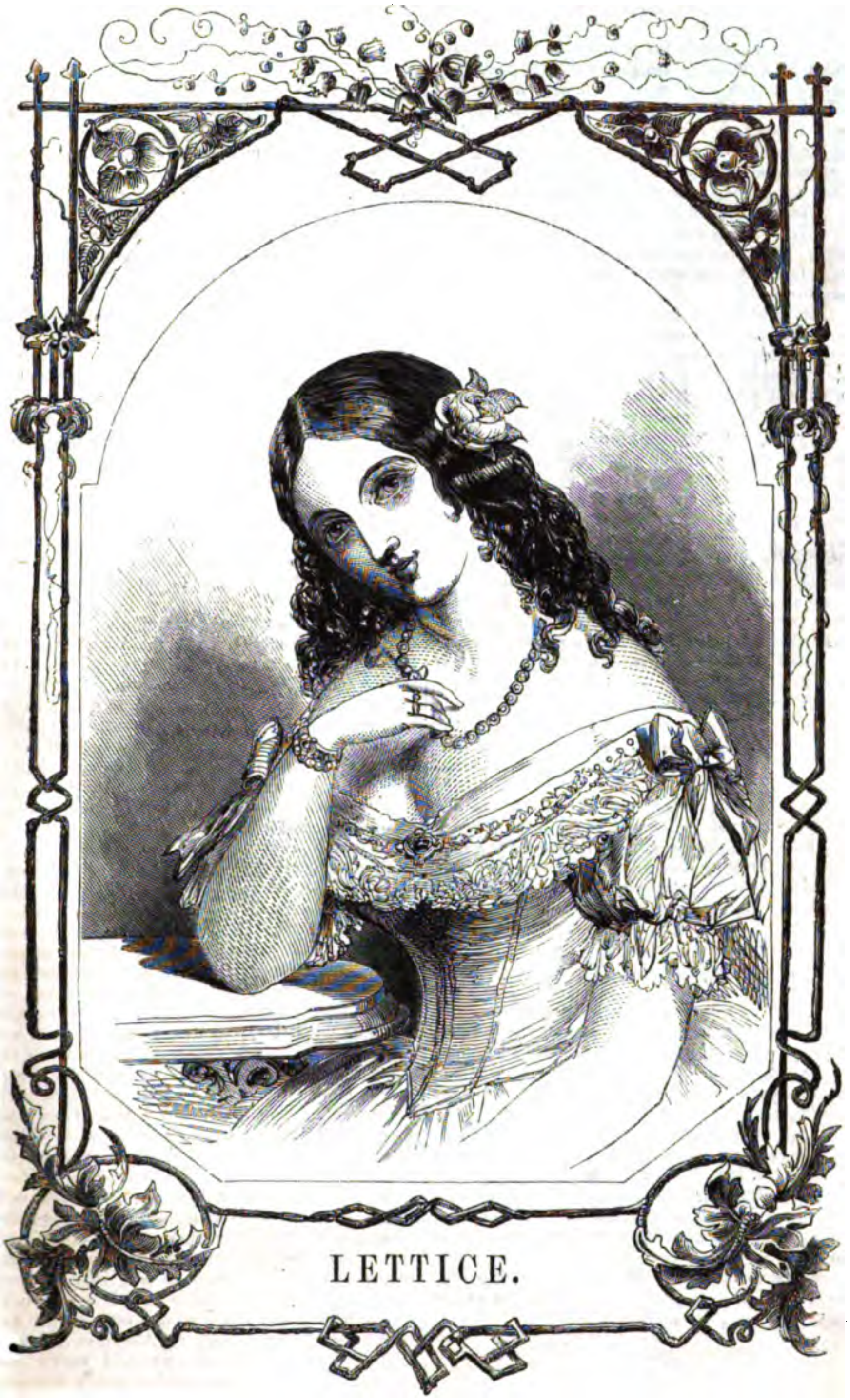
"And so you are secretary to a Duke?" she exclaimed, surveying Christian with as much admiration as if he were some rare animal just brought over from distant parts and lodged in the Zoological Gardens; "and you must therefore sit alone with his Grace for hours and hours. Well, I never spoke to a Duke in my life; and I don't think I ever saw a live one—at least not to my knowledge. But I saw a dead Duke once. It was in Edinburgh—during poor dear Mr. Macaulay's time: for to tell you the truth, he was an undertaker—and I went with him when he measured the body for the coffin. And your sister is companion to Lady Octavian Meredith?—and I suppose her ladyship makes much of your dear Christina? Well, I am delighted to find that you have got on so well in the world. You will make your fortunes. Ah! I never shall forget how I cried that time when you came and told me how Mr. Emanuel acted. I didn't choose to shed tears in your presence, because I was afraid it would dispirit you both: but when you were gone, I sat down and *did* have a good cry—and that's the truth of it. Dear me, to think of those Emanuels! Why, I knew Samuel Emanuel when he was an orange-boy, selling his fruit to the passengers that went off by the coaches from the *White Horse*, Piccadilly. Then he took to selling knives with twenty-four blades—not one of which, between you and me, would even cut so much as your nail. Next I found Mr. Samuel Emanuel going about with a bag at his back, and heaven only knows how many hats piled up on the top of his head: so that he looked like a walking stack of chimneys with a number of black chimney-pots stuck one above the other. Next I remember him standing in front of a little, poking, beggarly, second-hand clothes' shop in Holywell Street,—his wife a dirty drab, looking all greasy and oily—and his children playing in the gutter. Then he moved to his present house, which has grown by rapid degrees into——what does he call it? Oh, an Emporium! And now he rides in his carriage; and I suppose that if I happened to meet his wife, I must curtsy to her. Ah, what a world this is!"

And then, as if almost overcome by the feelings which this pathetic moral reflection conjured up, Mrs. Macaulay moved in an abstracted manner towards her cupboard—where she poured out and drank off the glass of wine which she had so recently been pressing upon Christian. At this moment there was a double knock at the front door; and the worthy woman exclaimed, as she wiped her lips, "There's Mr. Redcliffe!"

A few minutes afterwards Christian was seated with that gentleman in the apartment on the first floor. Redcliffe received him in the kindest manner: but being a man of very few words, except when it was necessary to speak at length, he soon gave the youth an opportunity of explaining the motive of his visit. Christian told him all that had passed between the Duke of Marchmont and Mr. Armytage: and Redcliffe listened in silence to the narrative.

"I hope, sir," said the youth, in conclusion, "that you will not think I have done wrong in listening to that discourse?"

"By no means, my young friend," responded Redcliffe. "We may consider ourselves to be en-



LETTICE.

gaged in warfare on behalf of an oppressed lady; and we must not hesitate to avail ourselves of whatsoever weapons accident may put in our hands."

"That is precisely the view which I took of the matter!" exclaimed Christian, delighted that there should be such an identity of thought on the part of himself and Clement Redcliffe. "Ah, by the bye, I forgot to mention something," he cried, as a recollection struck him. "Twice during the conversation did the Duke of Marchmont address Mr. Armytage by the name of Travers."

"Travers?" said Mr. Redcliffe.

"Yes—and it would appear," continued Christian, "that this was the name which Mr. Armytage formerly bore, when he was not so high up in the world."

Mr. Redcliffe reflected profoundly for some minutes; and at length he said, with an abruptness which he often displayed, "No, Christian Ashton—you have *not* done wrong in listening to what took place with those persons. Continue to watch the Duke's movements—gather up whatsoever you may hear passing around you at Marchmont House—store all words and facts in your memory, no matter how trivial they may at the moment appear—and from time to time make your report to me. Rest assured that we will baffle the conspirators, and that the injured Duchess shall issue triumphant from amidst the perils which environ her. You will then have done a noble deed; and for whatsoever trouble it may have cost you, you will experience an ample reward in the luxury of your own feelings."

"Rest assured, sir," answered Christian, "that I shall follow your advice in all things. Ah! I ought to have mentioned that it is rumoured in the household that we are all going down to the Duke's Hampshire estate of Oaklands in a few days—to remain there until the opening of Parliament in February."

"And perhaps Mr. Stanhope will be of the party," observed Redcliffe. "This is no doubt a portion of the plot—a cunning device for the purpose of throwing the villain Stanhope and the Duchess more frequently together. You must let me know when the day of departure is fixed."

"Ah, sir," Christian remarked, "the name of Oaklands must be memorable in the Marchmont family, and ominous for the welfare of the Duchess!"

"What do you mean?" inquired Redcliffe.

"Have you never heard, sir, of the dreadful tragedy which took place there, about eighteen years ago, and in which the name of a Duchess of Marchmont was so painfully mixed up? I was reading about it the other evening——"

"But we must take care," said Redcliffe, with that abruptness which we have before noticed as being to a certain degree characteristic of him, "that another Duchess shall not be painfully associated with the name of Oaklands. Now go, my young friend—I have business to attend to—letters to write."

Mr. Redcliffe shook Christian warmly by the hand; and the youth thereupon took his departure.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE EMPTY HOUSE.

EVERY day since the night of the fearful murder at the Smedleys' abode, either Bill Scott or his brother passed two or three times along Cambridge Terrace in the Regent's Park, and looked up at a particular house: but on each occasion the observer went away with the air of one who continued to be disappointed in something that he expected to take place. At length, one morning, Bill Scott beheld placards in the windows of that particular house, announcing that the stock of furniture was to be disposed of on the following day, according to the orders of the official assignee in the case of the bankruptcy of Joseph Preston. Bill Scott hastened homeward, and imparted this intelligence to the Burker.

"That's right, my boy," said Barnes, who was smoking a pipe and discussing a pot of porter at the time; "I knowed the bills couldn't be werry long afore they was posted up. But you're sure that you and your brother hav'n't dropped a word to them Smedleys about my setting you to watch that partickler house?"

"We hav'n't seen nuffin of the Smedleys ever since the business of t'other night," was Bill Scott's response; "and so we couldn't ha' talked if so be we had wished to do it—which we didn't."

"You are clever chaps, both of you," said the Burker approvingly—though the younger of his two adjutants was not present at the time to receive and acknowledge the compliment. "What a blessed thing it is for you fellers to have a chap like me which is as good as a father to you. When I think that I spent five pounds to give you each a bran new suit of toggery—bought second-hand at an old clothes' shop—for you to turn out swell on Sundays, I'm lost in admiration at my own generosity."

"But you make us stick to the rags, though, during the veek-days," observed Bill Scott, glancing somewhat sullenly down at his dirty and tattered attire.

"Well, and don't *I* stick to my own seedy togs during the veek?" demanded the Burker, indignantly: and then, as if to compose his feelings, he imbibed half the contents of the pewter pot,—having done which, he handed the vessel to Bill Scott. "I tell you what it is, young feller—if we was all three to turn out every day into Swell Street, it would regularly spile us for useful work. There's no gammon about the business: we hav'n't the gentility of cut that makes a chap fit for the swell-mob. So we must continue to work on as we does. Look how I have blowed your hides out with good things ever since that affair of last veek: I hav'n't stinted my share of the blunt, I hope. Coffee, hot rolls, and black-puddings for breakfast—roast weal or pork, or else biled beef, carrots, and taters, from the slap-bang shop for dinner—sassengers or eel-pies, and baked taters, for supper—with no end of malt and blue-ruin by way of lush. Now that's what I call living; and if the Lord Mayor and all his Aldermen can beat it, then I'm a Dutchman—which I werry well know I ain't, 'cos why my father was a out-an'-

out true-bred Englishman. Ah, Bill—he was a highly respectable man—he was. I've a right to be proud of his name, and I rewere his memory. He was in the priggin line for a matter ot forty year—wisited foreign parts for the good of his country—and died there. Ah, he knowed what Botany Bay and Norfolk Island was. I tell yer what, Bill—he was like the monkey that had seen the world which you read of in the fable-book."

"And who was your mother?" asked Bill Scott. "I never heerd you speak a word about her."

"Well, she was respectable in her way too," answered the Burker, when he had refilled and lighted his pipe. "She took in washing and stolen goods; and the latter was a precious sight more lucrative than the former. When my father got lagged—which in plain English he did—so it cost him nuffin, you understand, to go abroad and see the world——"

"Well, when he was lagged—what then?" asked Bill Scott.

"Why, my mother took on so that what with gin and grief she turned up her toes one fine morning; and the parish was so uncommon kind and had such a respect for her memory, that it purvided her with a funeral free gratis for nuffin. But my grandfather—*he* was the chap, Bill! He could turn his hand to anythink. I've heerd my father sit for hours and speak in admiration of his father afore him. *That* was the great Mr. Barnes, that was—the pride of the family! He was a horse-stealer."

"And a werry good thing too," said Bill Scott.

"Yes—but that warn't all. He was a coiner into the bargain," continued Barney the Burker, as he thus eulogized his ancestors: "and what's more, he was the smasher of his own manufactured blunt. When times was bad in that way, and the markets got glutted with base coin, he took to another perfession. That was thimble-rigging; and he thought nuffin of making his ten pun' note in a day at a country fair or market, or on a race-course. And then he was a perfect genelman in his habits—went to bed drunk every night of his life as reglar as clock-work."

"And how did *he* end?" asked Bill Scott.

"As a genelman should," responded the Burker: "he went out of this life in the least possible space of time when St. Sepulchre's clock struck eight one serene morning in May; and he didn't struggle more than half a minute as he danced on nuffin in the presence of five thousand genelmen and ladies which had collected together to do him honour. Now that's what I call being a great man; and I may be excoosed if I appear rayther wain of that ancestor of mine, the great Mr. Barnes."

"Ah, I should rayther think so," said Bill Scott admiringly.

"Why, you see," continued the Burker, as he smoked his pipe in a leisurely manner, "it's the natur' of human beings to be proud ot their ancestors. Wasn't we reading in a veekly paper t'other day that there's some great Dukes—I forget their names again—which is as proud as peacocks cos why their great, great, great grandmothers was what they call ladies of easy wirtue in the time of King Charles. So with the glorious example of the airistocracy afore my eyes, I may be allowed, I hope, to have a nat'ral pride in my own ancestors."

"To be sure!" said Bill Scott, approvingly; "but perhaps you will tell me why you've sent either me or Tim every day for the last week up into the Regent's Park to have a look whether the furnitur' is still in that there house, or whether there's bills up to say it's all to be sold by auction."

"Cos why it come to my knowledge—never mind how," answered the Burker, "that the chap which used to live in that house was made a bankrupt some time ago; and so I knowed wery well that as the things wasn't yet sold off, they would be soon—and that's the reason I set you fellers to watch and see."

"Well, but what has all that got to do with you?" asked Bill Scott. "I suppose *you* ain't a-going to take the house and set up in business as a genelman."

"No—I ain't a-going to retire from my perfession yet awhile," answered the Burker. "I hav'n't made my fortune."

"But you got a jolly lot of swag t'other night, though," observed the youthful thief,—"a matter of a hundred and twenty pounds for yourself. Them Smedleys ought to have let me and Tim go shears."

"Not a bit on't!" said the Burker sternly. "You wos only sarving an apprenticeship on that particklar night; and we ought to thank the Smedleys and old Mother Webber that they didn't make me fork out summut on your account as a premium on your indenturs'."

"Now, do you know what I would have done if I'd been you?" asked Bill Scott, after a pause.

"How can I know unless you tell me. What?"

"I'd have kept the whole of that there swag for myself," returned the youth with dogged dryness: "I'd have stuck to the blunt, s'elp me tater!"

"Then you would have done a thing which would have kivered you with shame and disgrace," rejoined the Burker, with a tone and look of surly indignation. "Hav'n't you larnt that werry excellent maxim, '*Honour amung thieves.*' If not, I had better punch it into your great thick head at once:"—and Barney looked very much as if he intended to suit the action to the word.

"Come, none of that!" exclaimed Scott, shrinking back in terror at the ferocious ruffian. "I didn't mean no harm."

"Then don't go for to start such immoral notions agin," said Mr. Barnes sternly: and contenting himself with this warning, he spared his youthful and delectable pupil the punching process that had been menaced.

"You hav'n't told me what you mean to do about that there house on Cambridge Terrace," said Bill Scott, after another pause.

"And what's more, I don't mean to tell you," answered the Burker. "It's a little private business of my own; and you had better not go and blab about it—or I should precious soon sarve you as I did that chap down at the Smedleys' t'other night. You and Tim can amuse yourselves with cards or dominoes and a pot of porter after supper to-morrow night, till I come home: for I des say I shall have to be out an hour or two. You have had a veek's holiday; and you and Tim must get to business to-morrow. The blunt I got t'other night won't last for ever; and we must make hay while the sun shines."

It is not however necessary to record any more of the conversation which took place, on this particular occasion, between Barney the Burker and his worthy pupil: for we must pass on to the narration of other matters.

On the following day the sale took place at the house which Joseph Preston had inhabited on Cambridge Terrace; and by eight o'clock in the evening all the "lots" were cleared away, according to the terms duly specified in the catalogue—of which Barney the Burker had obtained a copy, so that he might judge whether the house would be left empty after the sale.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock at night, that the ruffian issued from his lodgings—where he left the brothers Scott engaged in the manner which he had sketched forth on the preceding day. Barnes directed his steps towards the Regent's Park; and on arriving in the vicinage of Cambridge Terrace, he carefully scrutinized all the windows of the house where the sale had been. No lights were to be seen anywhere in the front; and Barney, passing round to the back of the Terrace, examined the premises from that point. The result was the same: not a single light was visible in any of the windows. A bill was posted against the stable-doors; and by the light of an adjacent lamp, Barney was enabled to read the large print thereof. It announced that the house was to be let on lease, applications to be made to an auctioneer in Albany Street, or else to the official assignee under Joseph Preston's bankruptcy.

"That's all right," said the Burker to himself: "applications isn't to be made upon the premises—and that's a sign there's nobody left in charge of 'em. Sharp feller, that assignee! If once you puts a man and his wife into a house to show it, and lets 'em live there free gratis for nothin' until it's let, I'm blowed if it will ever let at all. They are sure to stall off the ladies and genelmen as comes to look at it, by saying the dreanage is bad. That's a rule as inwariable as a judge pumping up his tears when he sentences a feller to death."

While making these very intellectual and erudite reflections, Barney the Burker was slowly passing away from the vicinage of the stables, in order that he might have another look at the front part of the house, so as fully to make up his mind as to the particular point in which he should attempt an entry: for such was the object he had in view. It did not however appear very safe to operate on the front, because the shadow of a policeman was descried at the farther end of the Terrace, and carriages were ever and anon proceeding in both directions, probably on account of *soirées* or parties being given at some of the adjacent dwellings. But on the other hand, the Burker had an almost equal objection to the attempt of a forcible entry by the rear of the premises; inasmuch as belated grooms connected with the adjoining stables, might be about. So Barney went and took a walk in some secluded portion of the Regent's Park, to reflect upon the most prudential course to be pursued under existing circumstances, and likewise to while away the time until a later hour, when the carriages should have ceased to roll and the belated grooms should have retired to rest.

The church clock in Albany Street had proclaimed the hour of one in the morning, as Barney the Burker retraced his way to the rear of the premises, where he had decided upon making the attempt. The coast was clear; and a small crowbar, dexterously as well as powerfully used, speedily forced open the door of the coach-house. Entering that place, he carefully closed and bolted the door behind him. One of his capacious pockets furnished a dark lantern: this was quickly lighted by means of matches, with which he was also provided; and he now took a survey of the premises. The stables were behind the coach-house; and thence there was no means of ingress to the yard or little garden, whichever it might be, in the rear of the empty house itself. He ascended a ladder into the upper storey, which he found to be divided into two compartments—one serving as a hay-loft, the other as a chamber for a groom or a coachman; and in this chamber there was a window looking into the yard which lay between the stabling-premises and the back of the house itself.

The dark lantern was re-consigned to the Burker's pocket: he carefully and noiselessly opened the window; and by means of a rope which he likewise had with him, lowered himself down into the yard. Creeping cautiously along the shade of the wall which separated that yard from the adjoining one,—so that no light from the back windows of the neighbouring dwellings should reveal his form to any one who might chance to be looking forth from his bed-chamber,—Barnes reached the back door of the house; and this he opened by means of his crowbar, with but little difficulty and loss of time. He was now inside the house: his entry had been successfully and rapidly accomplished. He listened with suspended breath: for notwithstanding the inference he had so shrewdly drawn from the announcements of the printed placard, he knew it was still within the range of possibility that there might be some person left in charge of the premises. But all appeared to be as silent as the tomb.

"Let me see!" thought the Burker to himself: "the front bed-room on the second floor. Them was the words."

He accordingly began to ascend the staircase in as noiseless a manner as possible,—pausing every now and then to assure himself that all continued still. In a few minutes he reached the particular room which he sought: but we should observe that from time to time he drew forth his dark lantern and threw the light around for a moment, so as to make himself thoroughly aware of the topography of the premises.

The house was completely denuded of all its furniture; and occasionally the naked boards of the staircases and the landings creaked beneath the Burker's tread. Still no other sounds reached his ears; and he felt tolerably well assured that he was the only human being at that moment inside the building. He reached, as we have said, the chamber which he sought: again his lantern was produced—but he was cautious where he threw the light, for fear lest it should be observed outside by the policeman on his beat. The shutters were however closed; and thus there was less danger of the rays penetrating forth. Barney held the lantern low down, and in such a manner that its light fell only upon the floor. Then he counted the boards from the left-hand side, until he had numbered *eleven*: and there he stopped. Drawing a bradawl from his pocket, he stuck it as deep into the wood as the force of his hand could drive it without making any noise; and it served as a handle to lift up the plank, which was previously so firm and secure in its setting that no one, by merely treading over it, would by its oscillation or yielding have been led to suspect it was thus moveable. The crossbeams formed so many different recesses; and these the Burker examined one after the other. But his countenance grew more and more blank—or rather expressive of a sullen, savage disappointment, as he found nothing.

"Well, I'm blowed," he said to himself, "if this isn't odd! One of three things must have happened. Either the chap lied in his letter—or else the Smedleys have been aforehand with me—or else the men which conducted the sale must have twigged the secret of the plank and got possession of what I'm searching arter."

But still fancying that he might have overlooked the object for which he had come, and which had cost him so much trouble, the Burker made a more careful scrutiny of the various recesses revealed by the extracted plank. Into each recess did he throw the light of his lantern: he thrust his hand in, and felt as far as he could reach on either side underneath the boards which still remained fastened down. For more than a quarter of an hour was he thus engaged: but he found nothing. With a low but terrible imprecation, he was compelled to give up the search; and without taking the trouble to restore the plank to its place, he issued from the chamber.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as he had mounted them, he reached the hall; and on arriving there, he took out his lantern to throw a light around—for he had forgotten the precise geography of the place.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, as the beams fell upon the front door; "this *is* precious odd!"

The Burker's surprise may be accounted for, when we inform the reader that the lantern had suddenly made him aware that the chain of the front door was hanging down, and that the lock had been wrenched off. He examined the door still more carefully; the bolts were drawn back—and it was only kept closed by the tightness with which it fitted into its setting.

"It's as clear as daylight," said the Burker to himself, with a deep concentration of fierce and savage feeling, "that some folks has been aforehand with me:—and who could it be if not them Smedleys? Well, if this isn't a dirty shabby trick, I'm blowed!"

The respectable Mr. Barnes did not reflect that he on his side had been all along endeavouring to outwit the Smedleys in the object for which he himself had come—or at least that he had kept his design altogether secret from them. He considered himself deeply wronged; and hence that expression of his injured feelings.

"But how the deuce did they get in?" he said to himself, perfectly bewildered. "That they went out of this here door—if it was raly them—is as plain as a pikestaff: but how *did* they get in first of all? They didn't force the door. The lock was broke off by some one inside, where I'm standing now. Ah, I can guess!" he ejaculated to himself, as a sudden light flashed in unto his mind. "They must have hid theirselves inside the house arter the sale—perhaps in the coal-cellar, or what not. A deuced clever trick, by jingo! But I will see if I can't be even with them yet."

His angry feelings were the least thing appeased by the resolution to which he had just arrived; and returning the dark lantern to his pocket, he issued forth from the front door, closing it behind him by the aid of the brass handle—and hurried away, unseen by a single soul.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TWO NEIGHBOURING HOUSES.

In one of the finest streets at the West-end of the town—but the name of which we suppress for reasons which will be presently obvious—there are an elegant milliner's establishment and a handsome tailor's shop next door to each other. The two houses, which are lofty, spacious, and of imposing appearance, belong to an uniform range,—the white fronts and large windows of which, as well as the general style of architecture, produce the impression which is conveyed by the best streets of Paris.

Through the immense panes of plate glass in the milliner's shop, may be seen an exquisite and elegant assortment of caps, bonnets, laces, veils, ribands, silks, &c.; and the *facia* over the shop-front indicates that the establishment belongs to Madame Angelique. The same name is repeated, but in miniature letters, on a brass-plate on the shop-door. The exterior would lead the passer-by to imagine that a respectable as well as a thriving business is carried on by Madame Angelique; and everything seems to be done to render the appearance of the shop as imposing and as attractive as possible. Nowhere are the windows more transparently clean—nowhere the paint fresher—nowhere the brass-work on the lower part of the window and on the door so brilliantly resplendent. If you enter the establishment, the impression produced by the exterior is sustained and confirmed. The shelves are arranged with neat drab-coloured pasteboard boxes, edged with pink, and which are speedily taken down to display their exquisite contents of laces or costly silks—their caps or their gloves—their trimmings or artificial flowers, to the eyes of customers. The mahogany counter is scrupulously burnished: the chairs have crimson cushions; and in the evening the shop is a blaze of gas-light. Sometimes it is Madame Angelique herself who attends upon her lady-customers: at other times it is a genteel-looking deputy of a certain age, and who speaks French with the finest Parisian accent, but English with scarcely any describable accent at all. A glass-door at the extremity of the spacious shop, frequently stands half-open, and reveals some dozen of work-women in a large room comfortably furnished, and where dresses are made up or caps and bonnets trimmed. A very handsome circular staircase, with bronze balustrades, and carpeted all over, leads up into the show-rooms, which occupy the whole of the first floor. These are sumptuously furnished: lustres, vases, and *or-mols* clocks embellish the marble mantel-pieces, and are reflected in the immense mirrors with their massive gilt frames. Splendid chandeliers, all of the finest cut glass, hang to the ceiling; and these at dusk are lighted with wax-candles, which flood the apartments with as brilliant a lustre as that which prevails in a West-end saloon when a banquet or ball is given. The carpets in the show-rooms are so thick that the delicate feet of lady-visitresses are completely lost in them: the patterns are of the richest description, and match well with the deep crimson paper of the walls and the general style of the furniture. The costliest as well as the most elegant dresses are to be seen in these apartments; and whichever way a visitress may turn, she finds her form reflected either in a mirror against the wall, or in an immense oval psyche. There are few chairs in these rooms—but numbers of sumptuous ottomans, covered with velvet, are ranged around. These ottomans are so many large chests or boxes, the lids of which are made to lift up, cushion and all; and from the mysterious depths of the interior Madame Angelique or the show-women produce the newest elegancies of Parisian fashion—such as bonnets, caps, and materials for ladies' dresses.

The show-women themselves are middle-aged persons, but dressed with the utmost taste and neatness—of affable and obliging manners—and bearing the stamp of unquestionable respectability. Neither in the shop down stairs, nor in the show-rooms, are any of the females very young or very good-looking: so that if a somewhat particular lady, or an uxorious husband accompanying his wife, pay a visit to Madame Angelique's establishment, nothing meets the eye to induce a suspicion as to its perfect propriety. We should add that the young women themselves in the work-room, seemed to have been chosen as much for their absence of personal charms as, we may suppose, for their skilfulness with the needle; and perhaps the door of communication between that room and the shop is intentionally left open, to convince such straight-laced lady or particular husband accompanying his wife, as those whom we have alluded to, that in every possible department of Madame Angelique's business the females employed are of modest demeanour, as well as of an age and appearance which may defy the breath of scandal.

But then, Madame Angelique's house is a very large one; and there are floors higher than the show-rooms. Most of Madame Angelique's customers know that she is a widow, and that only two or three of her principal dependants live on the premises. What, then, does she do with all the upper part of her spacious house? If occasionally some curious old dowager or ingenuous young lady happens to put the question, Madame Angelique, with one of her most amiable smiles, speaks of the immense stock of goods which she is constantly compelled to keep on hand—and thus promptly attributes a use and a purpose to all the up-stairs rooms which are not occupied by herself, her principal women, and her domestics. In short, the establishment of which we are speaking, has the appearance and the general reputation of being one of the most respectable, as it is assuredly one of the most fashionable and best frequented, *Magasins des Modes* to be found at the West End of London.

Before we pass away to a description of her neighbour's, we must say a few words of Madame Angelique herself. She is about fifty years of age—of a comely and matronly appearance. She is a French woman—as her name, her manners, and her speech indicate. Somewhat stout, she is nevertheless bustling and active; and she thinks no trouble too great to bestow upon a customer. Indeed, her bearing is as urbane, her smile as complacent, and the expressions of her gratitude as great, towards a lady who merely drops in to buy a three-and-sixpenny riband or a half-guinea cap, as they are to another customer who leaves behind an order for a twenty-guinea dress. There is nothing obtrusive in her politeness: it is measured to the utmost nicety. She will only press her goods to a certain point—and no farther: she will expatiate upon how much this or that article is sure to become the complexion of the particular customer with whom she is treating at the time—but she will not too persuasively force the said articles upon such customer. Thus she gives universal satisfaction; and as for her bills, she only sends them in once a-year—about three months after Christmas—remaining perfectly satisfied if they be liquidated any time before the ensuing Christmas. It were almost needless to add that she herself dresses with the most unexceptionable taste,—in a manner becoming her years, with the slightest dash of a Parisian coquetry—but yet so far removed from being *outré* that it is impossible to make her look ridiculous. She uses rouge and pearl-powder with so much skill, that only those ladies who are equally skilful in the mysteries of the toilet, could discern how much her complexion is indebted to those accessories; and her smile reveals so admirable a set of teeth, that even the wearers of false ones themselves would find it difficult to attribute Madame Angelique's to the succedaneous art of a renowned dentist in the same street.

The tailor's shop next door is as handsome in its own way as the *Magasin* of Madame Angelique. It is the establishment of no cheap clothier: none of the exquisitely fashioned articles of raiment displayed in the window, are vulgarised by ticketed prices. M. Bertin—for the tailor is a Frenchman, as Madame Angelique is a Frenchwoman—would scorn the idea of selling pantaloons at sixteen shillings, surtouts at two guineas, and paletots at two ten. No suit of clothes is sent out from his establishment under seven guineas. His name is in gilt letters over the shop-front—in brass letters ingeniously stuck on to the middle pane of plate-glass—and repeated on a brass-plate on the shop-door. Everything looks business-like and respectable—yes, and wealthy also, at M. Bertin's; and if a passer-by glances up at the windows on the drawing-room or higher floors, he beholds rich draperies and the tops of gilt back chairs, all indicative of the sumptuous interior of M. Bertin's habitation. As for M. Bertin himself, he is a short, middle-aged man—very active and very obsequious—tolerably good-looking for his years—exquisitely dressed—making a large display of watch-chain festooning over his waistcoat—of diamond studs to the cambric front of his shirt—and of rings upon his fingers. He speaks English tolerably well, but with a strong accent; and as he is amassing a fortune in this country, he loves it ten thousand times better than his own.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening that the Duke of Marchmont strolled into M. Bertin's shop,—which, as well as his neighbour's, was brilliantly lighted with gas; and after exchanging a few words of little moment with the foreman who was behind the counter, his Grace passed through a side door into the private passage. He ascended the staircase with the air of one who was perfectly well acquainted with the geography of the premises, and who felt himself perfectly at home in this proceeding. Mounting to the second floor, he tapped gently at a door, which was immediately opened by a middle-aged and discreet-looking female domestic.

"The young ladies there, Annette?" inquired the Duke, with a significant glance thrown across the room into which the door opened.

"Yes, my lord," was the woman's response.

"Disengaged?"

"Yes, my lord."

Without another word, Annette led the way across the room, which was handsomely furnished—and advanced straight up to a large mirror which seemed to be suspended in the usual manner against the solid wall, though reaching down to the carpet. It was however in reality a door, which opened by means of a secret spring; and the woman tapped at what appeared to be the back part of a closet thus revealed. That woodwork against which she knocked, was speedily opened in the form of another door; the woman stood aside—and the Duke passed in to the place whither these singular and mysterious means of communication led. A beautiful girl, elegantly dressed, held that inner door open to afford the Duke admission; and when he had entered, she closed it again. It was an immense mirror, suspended like the one in the room from which he had emerged; and when the door which it formed was shut, no one, unless in the secret, could have possibly entertained the slightest suspicion that it was a door at all.

The reader has perhaps by this time comprehended that the Duke of Marchmont had passed from the tailor's house into the milliner's: or if there be any such reader so obtuse of intellect as not to comprehend this fact, we now beg to announce it. Yes—his Grace of Marchmont was in one of the higher rooms of Madame Angelique's abode. It was splendidly furnished—with mirrors, draperies, pictures, and statues. But these were the least attractions there, in comparison with four lovely beings in female shape, who seemed to be the presiding deities of this luxurious apartment. One had opened the mysterious door, as already stated, to give the Duke admission. She was a fine, well-grown, and exceedingly handsome young woman, of about two-and-twenty. Her glossy brown hair was arranged in bands, with an artificial flower like a camelia on one side of the head. Her dress, of fawn-coloured satin, was made very low in the body, revealing a gorgeous bust: the richest lace trimmed the upper part of the corsage, both back and front; and ribands depended from the shoulders. Her arms were bare: and splendid arms they were,—a trifle too robust perhaps for statue-like symmetry—but plump, well rounded, and dazzlingly white. This young woman was a native of England; and she was known to the Duke of Marchmont, as well as perhaps to others, by the Christian name of Lettice—this being short for Letitia.

The second divinity of the place whom we must notice, was a French girl, named Armantine, and who was of ravishing loveliness. Her features were delicately formed and faultlessly regular. Her hair, a shade darker than the English girl's, was arranged in a sort of Greek knot; and it shone with a rich gloss, all its own. She too was elegantly apparelled,—the light satin dress setting off the slender symmetry of her shape, and revealing much of the well-formed bust, which was less exuberant and more statuesque than the voluptuous contours of Miss Lettice.

The third female occupant of the room was a German girl, with masses of rich auburn hair clustering down upon her brilliantly white neck and shoulders. She too was eminently beautiful—but with a sensuously outlined profile, and large languishing blue eyes. Her figure combined slenderness of shape with rich development of contours. Of the four she alone had not her arms bare:—not that she had any reason to conceal them on account of defective modelling: it was simply a matter of taste that she wore the elegant Parisian sleeves which at that time had just come into fashion. This German beauty was known to the Duke of Marchmont by the Christian name of Linda.

The fourth was a charming Irish girl, with mischievous eyes and piquant features,—the dewy lips expressive of much feeling, and the form combining elegance of symmetry with lithe and willowy grace. She answered to the name of Eveleen. And now we may add, in respect to all four, that they possessed teeth white as pearls; and that in this respect, if an apple of discord had been thrown amongst them, no Trojan umpire could have honestly and conscientiously awarded it to any one in particular. In short, Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen, were assuredly four of the loveliest specimens of the female sex that could possibly be found grouped together in the same apartment.

That the Duke of Marchmont was no stranger to them, was evident by the manner in which they greeted him on his arrival. The restraint which his rank might elsewhere have imposed, was here altogether lost sight of,—as will be seen from the way in which the young females respectively addressed him.

"Is it you, my dear Marchmont?" exclaimed Lettice, the English woman, as she gave him admittance by means of the mysterious mirror-contrived doorway: and she spoke in a rich flute-like voice, which seemed quite appropriate to the fine, well-developed, and imposing style of her beauty.

"That wicked Marchmont, who always makes me drink so much champagne!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Armantine, who spoke English with only just so much of a foreign accent as to render it interesting when floating on her soft silvery tones.

"It is just why Marchmont *is* welcome," said Linda, the German girl, who also spoke English well: "because he is sure to give us champagne."

"Hold your tongues, you selfish creatures!" cried Eveleen, the Irish girl, with that interesting intonation of voice which gives such a peculiar charm to the Hibernian accent upon the lip of a well-bred daughter of the Emerald Isle. "Let us welcome him in another way:"—and with sportive joyousness she wound her arms about the Duke's neck, at the same time kissing him upon either cheek.

"Oh, if that is the sort of welcome you have in store for me," said Marchmont, "pray let it be given at once."

Thereupon Miss Lettice folded him in her embrace: Mademoiselle Armantine was the next to dispense her caresses; and though the German girl came last, yet she held him longest in her arms.

"And now my fair ones," exclaimed the Duke, laughing with the air of a man who purposely sought this kind of society for the purpose of escaping from more serious, and perhaps unpleasant reflections—"let us have champagne and fruit, and we will pass a merry evening together. But first of all I must have a few words with Madame Angelique—and in private too. I have something of importance to speak to her about."

"You know where to find her," said Lettice: "she is in her own room at this moment. Go quick, Marchmont—and if you remain too long, we will all four come in a body, armed with champagne-bottles, and with forced fruit as missiles, to drive you back as our captive."

"Chains of festooning flowers should not be omitted from the implements of your coercion," answered the Duke, forcing himself to speak in a gay manner: though, as he opened a door opposite the mysteriously contrived mirror, he could scarcely keep back a sigh which rose up into his very throat.

Closing the door behind him, he traversed the well carpeted passage, and tapped at another door on the same storey. The well-known voice of Madame Angelique bade him enter; and he found her seated at table with none other than her neighbour M. Bertin. There was an exquisite supper upon the table,—a repast consisting of succulent French delicacies, served up on silver plate, and flanked with bottles of champagne, Burgundy, and Bordeaux. The room was a small one—but furnished in the most luxurious manner. It was Madame's boudoir; and a door facing the one by which the Duke had entered, communicated with her bed-chamber. M. Bertin rose and bowed obsequiously: but Madame Angelique contented herself with a half-courteous, half-familiar smile,—at the same time indicating a chair.

"I am sorry to disturb you, my dear madam, in the midst of so agreeable a *tête-à-tête*," said the Duke, speaking in the French tongue, with which he was perfectly conversant: "but I have some business of importance to discuss with you. Shall I return presently?"

"By no means, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, in a most gracious manner: for she doubtless well knew that the Duke's gold would indemnify her well for any little inconvenience she might experience on the score of the delicacies of the supper-table getting cold.

"And it just happens," said the discreet and obsequious M. Bertin, "that I have a couple of letters to write——"

"Which need not take you more than a quarter of an hour," observed the Duke,—thus indicating the interval that he wished the tailor to remain absent from the milliner's boudoir.

M. Bertin bowed and withdrew: but so far from returning into his own house, or having any letters at all to write, he merely lounged away the prescribed quarter of an hour in an adjoining room. Meanwhile let us see what took place between the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique.

"I believe, my excellent friend," said his Grace, "that you make all my wife's dresses?"

"I have for some years enjoyed the honour of her Grace's patronage," was the milliner's response.

"And mine too, for that matter," exclaimed the Duke, with a laugh. "But joking apart, have you made any dresses for her Grace recently?"

"At this very moment, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, "I have three or four in hand for the Duchess of Marchmont."

"Good!" ejaculated the Duke. "Of course you can make duplicates?"

"Make duplicates, my lord!" cried the milliner, with a most genuine amazement.

"To be sure. Why not?"

"Oh!—of course, if your Grace wishes it, I could make a dozen of precisely the same sort."

"Never mind the dozen," rejoined Marchmont: "a duplicate of each will answer all my purpose. But recollect, the work must be so well done and the resemblances so exact, that her Grace's own maid, if appealed to upon the subject, could not possibly suspect that there were duplicates of her mistress's raiment."

"All this can be done, my lord," replied Madame Angelique: "and without for a single moment attempting to pry impertinently into your Grace's reasons and objects, pardon me for expressing a hope that no evil consequences will redound to myself?"

"I will take care of that," answered the Duke. "When will these dresses be ready?"

"Her Grace tells me, my lord, that you are all going into the country the day after to-morrow; and the dresses which her Grace has ordered, must consequently be sent home to-morrow night."

"And when can the counterparts be in readiness?" inquired Marchmont.

"It will take a good week, my lord——"

"A week?—nonsense!" ejaculated Marchmont.

"I cannot possibly get them done in less time. Say on the sixth evening hence," added Madame Angelique, after a little reflection.

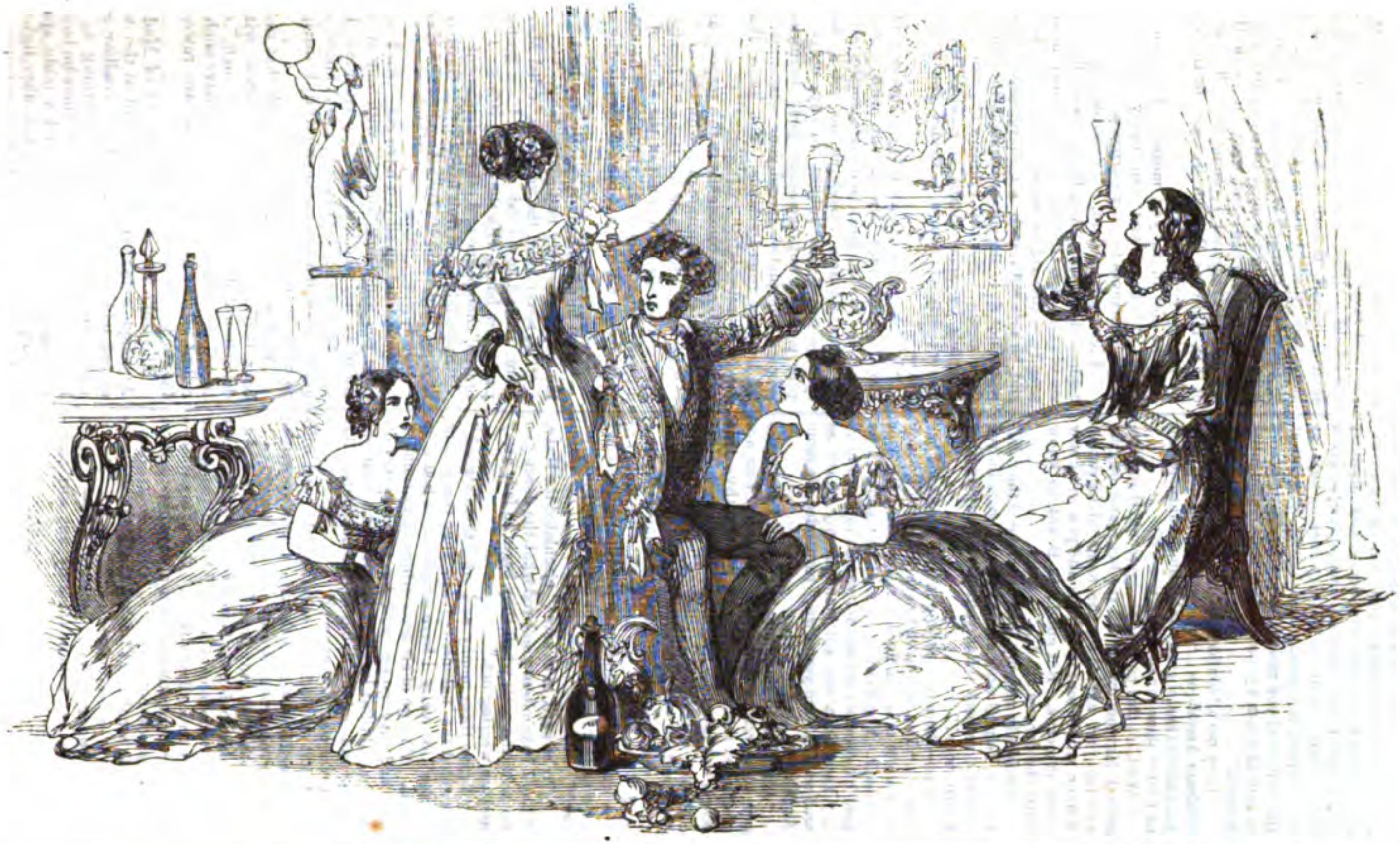
"Very good," replied the Duke: "that must suffice."

"They shall be positively at Marchmont House by nine o'clock on the day named——"

"No—you must not send them direct to Marchmont House," exclaimed the Duke: "that will never do! There must be no trace——But how can it be managed?"

"Shall I forward the dresses in a box to Oaklands, my lord?" asked the milliner.

"A box so light as that will be with nothing but woman's trumpery in it, would seem suspicious



if addressed to me. And then, too, it is absolutely necessary for my purpose that there should exist no possible clue——Ah, I recollect, I have an unsophisticated, unsuspicious, docile, and obedient young man in my service. Let me see?—this is Wednesday. Well, on Tuesday evening next, at nine o'clock, this young man shall be in a cab at the door; and you must have the dresses delivered to him in a box by one of your most confidential women."

"They are all confidential, my lord," responded Madame Angelique; "or else I should not have been able to sustain my establishment unsuspected as I have done for so many years?"

"Well, let this be the arrangement, then," resumed Marchmont. "At the hour and on the evening just agreed to, the name of Christian Ashton will be sent in to you; and you will know what it means. But mind; *he* is not to know what the dresses are."

"Decidedly not, my lord," exclaimed the milliner. "Your Grace's commands shall be followed in every respect. Has your Grace any further instructions?"

"Yes—there is one thing more," proceeded the Duke. "You will have to spare Lettice Rodney for a short time. I need her services. Do you consent? You know very well that you will be paid handsomely for all that you do to serve me."

"Your Grace can command in my house as well as if it were your own," responded Madame Angelique.

"Good," said Marchmont. "Then I will make my own arrangements with Lettice. You are convinced that she is perfectly trustworthy—that she is one to whom may be confided a task of no ordinary importance? Remember, she will be well paid, as you yourself will be——"

"I can rely upon her," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Has she not been with me since she was fifteen?—does she not regard me as her own mother?—have I not done everything for her?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" ejaculated the Duke. "But I have often wondered what the deuce you do with the girls when they begin to fade away and are wearing out."

"I give them money and send them abroad," answered the milliner. "Ah, your Grace little thinks how many I have supplied to a house in Paris. Change of air soon brings them round a bit; and they go on well for a few years in France, until at length they get down into the streets and end by dying in the hospitals. But what else can they expect?"

"What else indeed?" said the Duke: and with this heartless assent to the vile woman's observation, he rose from his seat.

"By the bye, my lord," cried Madame Angelique, beckoning his Grace towards her with an air of misterious confidence, "I have found out such an extraordinary thing. One of my spies—and your Grace knows that I always have several upon the look-out——"

"Well, what is it?" asked the Duke. "Something new in the female line?"

"Something new indeed, my lord—if it is possible to get hold of them by any sort of inveigling——"

"*Them?*" cried the Duke. "You speak of more than one."

"I speak of two, my lord," answered Madame Angelique. "It is just this:—"In a certain suburb of London there lives an Eastern lady of the most ravishing beauty; and she has in her household a Hindoo woman as grandly handsome as herself, though of a different style. I have seen them both. They ride out occasionally in a carriage in their own neighbourhood: though for the most part they live quietly and unostentatiously—and what on earth they are doing in England, I cannot tell. The worst of it is, there are English servants in the establishment——"

"The best of it, you mean!" ejaculated the Duke; "because you can easily bribe those English servants to your purposes."

"I fear not, my lord. My confidential agent," continued Madame Angelique, "who first told me of these rare Oriental exotics, endeavoured to sound the steward or butler, or whatever he is; and he met with such a cold reception that it would not do to attempt anything farther through those means. Not that I despair of getting these Orientals by some means or another into my power; only of course I should run a great risk——"

"Which is as much as to give me to understand," interrupted Marchmont, with a smile, "that the reward must be commensurate. Well, my dear Madame Angelique, do not speak a syllable upon this subject to any others of your patrons: but prosecute your inquiries—prepare your plans—spread your nets—and wait till I return from Oaklands. You know that I can be liberal——"

"Your Grace's commands in this respect, as in all others, shall be paramount with me."

"Ah, by the bye," said the Duke, "I had better give you a trifle on account of the affair of the dresses. How much have you there?" he asked, as he tossed a handful of bank-notes into the milliner's lap.

"Two hundred pounds exactly, my lord," was the response. "My best gratitude——"

"Oh, never mind the gratitude," cried Marchmont. "And now good night. I am going to pass a few hours with the young ladies: I have ordered champagne and other refreshments——"

"Splendid forced fruit from Covent Garden today, my lord," said Madame Angelique. "Melons—pine-apples—grapes——"

"Well, send up all you have got. And now I hope you will amuse yourself with our worthy friend Bertin, who is discretion personified. I am sure if it were not for you two, I don't know what gentlemen and ladies having pretty little intrigues to carry on, could possibly do."

"Well, my lord, I do flatter myself that neighbour Bertin and I carry on the business with a discretion that is unparalleled. But then," continued the milliner, "so long as we have such excellent patrons as your Grace, we are rewarded for our trouble and anxiety."

The Duke smiled at the thought of Madame Angelique's anxiety as he glanced at the well-spread table; and nodding her a familiar good night, he quitted the room. Returning to the luxuriously furnished apartment where he had left the four young ladies, he found a table spread with all kinds of wine, fruits, and other light refreshments. Nothing could be more sensuously refined than everything which met his view. The apartment flooded with light—the rich furniture—the crimson draperies—the brilliant mirrors—the wine sparkling in the decanters—the fruit in the dishes of cut glass and in china baskets—and the ravishing loveliness of the four young women who were to be his companions at the festival,—all combined to elevate his spirits and win him away from certain sombre reflections which had been hanging upon his soul ere he sought the present scene. The atmosphere of the apartment was warm and perfumed, but without a sickly oppressiveness: the brilliant light was reflected in the eyes of the four charmers—it made their teeth gleam like pearls—their lips have the vivid semblance of wet coral; it displayed the dazzling transparency of their complexions to the utmost advantage—it shed a richer gloss on their naturally shining air.

"Come, my dear Marchmont," said Lettice, "and let me sit on one side of you."

"And I," said the young Irish girl, "on the other."

"But Marchmont loves to be at his ease," cried the sprightly Armantine: and she bounded from the room,—in a few minutes returning with a costly flowered silk dressing-gown, the production of which elicited peals of merry laughter from herself and her companions.

"Come," said Linda, the German girl, "off with the coat and on with the dressing-gown! It makes you look so much as if you felt yourself at home."

"Have your own way," said the Duke. "And now to table, you merry romps.

They sat down: the champagne quickly began to circulate—laughter pealed like silver bells around—the Duke felt himself gay—he forgot whatsoever cares had been troubling him—he plunged headlong as it were into the vortex of pleasure, in order to drown his recollections. Be it understood that the young women were not merely well educated, but accomplished likewise. They had belonged to genteel families, from whose bosom they were beguiled away by the infamous agents of the still more infamous Madame Angelique; and if there were at any time remorseful feelings in their souls, they were compelled to stifle them as well as they could; for they felt that they had entered upon a career whence there was no retrogression. But they were accomplished, we say: they all had good conversational powers—and the discourse became as sparkling as the wine which gave it zest. After a while, when the whole party were exhilarated, they got up and danced; and the Duke abandoned himself with a sort of wild frenzy to the hilarious proceeding. Were he a youth of eighteen or twenty, he could not have entered more completely into this fun and frolic. At length, when exhausted with waltzing and romping, he threw himself upon a chair; and the champagne-glasses were filled again.

"Long live such gaiety as our's!" cried Marchmont, lifting up his glass in one hand, while the other arm encircled the splendid shape of the gorgeously handsome Lettice.

"Oh, for ever such gaiety as this!" exclaimed Linda, who had likewise thrown herself upon a seat; and as she held her glass up, she watched the sparkling of the wine ere she conveyed it to her sensuously breathing lips.

"That wicked Marchmont has whirled me round so," cried the Irish girl, "that he has tired me out!"—and she threw herself upon a footstool.

"Moisten your lips with fruit," said Armantine, as she sped to the table; and quickly returning with a china basket containing melon, pine-apple, oranges, apples, pears, and grapes, she placed it on the carpet at the Duke's feet.

Then, likewise seating herself upon a footstool, she listened while Marchmont and Lettice sang together a Bacchanalian English song. What a scene of luxurious enjoyment, blended with the ravishments of feminine beauty, was that for the pencil of an artist!

It was past one in the morning when Marchmont thought of taking his departure. He placed under one of the fruit-dishes a sum of money in bank-notes, as a mark of his liberality towards the charming companions of his revel; and then he drew Lettice aside into a window-recess, where he conversed with her for a few minutes in a low tone of voice. The other three girls chatted together at the opposite extremity of the room: they heard not what passed between Marchmont and Lettice Rodney—neither did they seek to catch a single word. They were all on the friendliest terms with one another: they had no jealousy. Their exquisite beauty ensured to them all an equal amount of favour on the part of their aristocratic patrons; and being girls of good education—feeling too at times their loss and degraded position, they knew how useless it was to aggravate it by petty contentions amongst themselves.

The conversation between the Duke and Lettice terminated: the nobleman embraced all four one after another, and then took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COVENT GARDEN.

On the following day Christian Ashton was engaged, as usual, in the forenoon, attending to his ducal employer's correspondence; and when it was terminated, he rose to withdraw from the library; but Marchmont said, "Sit down again, Christian: I wish to speak to you."

The youth resumed his chair, and prepared to listen attentively to whatsoever might be addressed to him.

"I think, Christian," continued his Grace, "that you are happy and comfortable in your present situation—and that inasmuch as your welfare is looked after by me, you yourself are willing and anxious to give me every possible satisfaction."

"It is my duty, so long as I eat your Grace's bread," responded the youth—thus avoiding the necessity of telling a falsehood by the assertion that he *was* happy in the Duke's employment.

"I expected no less from your lips," continued Marchmont. "There is a little service which you will have to render me. To-morrow I go with her Grace to Oaklands: but you will not follow until the early part of next week. You will thus have a little holiday, and plenty of opportunities to see your charming sister. Next Tuesday night at nine o'clock you will take a cab and repair to a particular address, which is written on this card," —at the same time presenting one. "You will merely knock at the door and send in your own name. A large box will be given to you, of which you must take particular care. It contains things which I design as presents; and the truth is I wish to surprise those for whom the gifts are destined:—hence this little degree of mystery which I am observing on the point. You will leave London by the first coach on Wednesday morning; and you will bring the box amongst your own luggage. Put upon it a card with your own name; and when you arrive at Oaklands, let it be taken up, together with your other boxes, to the chamber which will be allotted to you there. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded Christian.

"And you will see the necessity of keeping the matter profoundly secret," rejoined the Duke: "because, as I tell you, I mean to divert myself a little with the distribution of the presents which the box contains. I know that I can rely on your discretion and fidelity. Mr. Calvert will provide you with the requisite funds for your travelling expenses; and you must be sure to arrive at Oaklands in the course of next Wednesday."

Christian bowed, and quitted the library. Sallying forth, he proceeded at once to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and communicated to Mr. Redcliffe everything that had just taken place between himself and the Duke. The address of the house at which he was to call, was Madame Angelique's; and Christian having purposely passed it by in his walk up to Mrs. Macaulay's, was enabled to report that it was a milliner's establishment. Neither Redcliffe nor himself for a moment believed that Marchmont's explanation of certain intended gifts, was otherwise than a pretext for some ulterior design: but what this design might be, young Ashton could not for the life of him conjecture—while Mr. Redcliffe volunteered no surmise.

"You must perform exactly, my young friend," he said, "the mission that is entrusted to you: but upon obtaining possession of the box, come direct hither to me before you take it to Marchmont House. I may then tell you how we will act. Besides, it is necessary that I should see you again ere your departure for Oaklands."

Christian promised to fulfil Mr. Redcliffe's instructions; and took his leave of this gentleman. He stepped into Mrs. Macaulay's parlour to shake hands with the widow,—who bade him be sure and not forget to bring his sister to take a friendly cup of tea with her on the first convenient evening. He was about to depart, when Mrs. Macaulay beckoned him back, and in a tone of mysterious confidence, she said, "By the bye, I remember I have got a little party on Saturday evening; and it's on rather a memorable occasion. The fact is, I and Mrs. Sifkin have not been on speaking terms with each other for the last ten years. Not that it was any fault of mine, you know; because I am quite incapable of giving offence even to a worm—much less a human being that walks upright on two legs. It was all owing to jealousy on Mrs. Sifkin's part. However she has made overtures through Mrs. Dumpling—a lady in the same street. She lets lodgings too, does Mrs. Dumpling; and between you and me, wretched apartments they are! You wouldn't believe it, my dear Mr. Ashton," added Mrs. Macaulay, in a voice of awful mystery: "no—you never would believe it!—but it is as true as I am a living woman!"

"What's true?" asked Christian.

"Bugs, my young friend—bugs, I can assure you!" replied Mrs. Macaulay. "Nothing should induce me to say such a thing of a neighbour, if it wasn't the case. If they were fleas only—but bugs——dreadful!"

"Dreadful indeed!" muttered Christian, with a sensation as if something disagreeable were creeping over him under his clothes.

"However," proceeded Mrs. Macaulay, "barring the bugs, Mrs. Dumpling is a very excellent neighbour, and a kind-hearted woman—though she does give nothing but that odious currant wine of her's and captain's biscuits, with maybe a stale tart or two, for supper when she has a little party. Still she *is* a good woman; and she went right across yesterday morning to Mrs. Sifkin, and told her her mind about her conduct towards me. I dare say that Mrs. Dumpling did come out rather strong, because I know that she had had a *leetle* drop of brandy beforehand ——in fact, it was out of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe, poor dear soul! sent down from his room——However the long and short of it was that Mrs. Sifkin confessed the errors of her ways; and Mrs. Dumpling proposed that if Mrs. Sifkin would send me over an apology through her, I would give a party to clinch the reconciliation and celebrate the event. So I mean to do the thing nicely, and give a pretty spread on Saturday evening; and if you and your dear sister will favour me with your company, I shall be delighted."

"I cannot say how my sister may be engaged," answered Christian; "and I do not for a moment think that she will be enabled to accept your kind invitation. But as for myself, I say *yes* with much pleasure."

"And you will be welcome," said Mrs. Macaulay. "But pray do bring your dear sister, if she can possibly manage to come."

Christian bade the woman good-bye, and hastened on to the Regent's Park to see Christina. He had not the least intention of bringing her in contact either with the amiable Mrs. Sifkin, or with Mrs. Dumpling who had bugs in her lodgings: but he had accepted the invitation for himself, not only because he fancied that he might be dull at Marchmont House while the family was away—but also because he had some little curiosity to see how the rival lodging-house keepers would get on together.

It was about two in the afternoon of the following day, that Mr. Redcliffe—enveloped in his cloak as usual, and with his hat more or less slouched over his countenance—walked slowly down that fashionable street in which the adjoining establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin were situated. Having well surveyed the milliner's premises—or rather their exterior,—Redcliffe continued his way; and if the thoughts which were passing in his mind, were reduced to words, they would have taken some such shape as the following:—

"The establishment seems respectable enough:

but yet the fairest exterior often veils the foulest corruptions. There is some deep mystery in connexion with that box which is to come next Tuesday night from this house; and I must fathom it. Every incident, however trivial it may appear, is to me of momentous import. Who knows how it may serve as a link in that chain which I am endeavouring to follow up? The link may not for the moment seem to fit: but it must not on this account be discarded. Who can tell but that it will sooner or later find its appropriate place and help me on to the accomplishment of my aim?"

While thus meditating, Clement Redcliffe pursued his way—at first without perceiving the direction he was taking, and without any specific object in view. But suddenly he bethought himself of a poor invalid old man whose case had become known to him in his wanderings about the metropolis, and whose last few weeks in this life he was soothing with that quiet unostentatious benevolence which he was wont to afford. The medical man whose services his purse had provided for this invalid, had recommended certain little delicacies, cooling fruits, and so forth; and Redcliffe now continued his way towards Covent Garden Market, to make such purchases as under the circumstances he thought would be acceptable. Arrived in the arcade, his charitable intentions were speedily carried out; and on quitting the fruiterer's shop, he strolled up to the terrace on the roof of the market, where flowers are exhibited. Redcliffe was passionately fond of contemplating floral rarities,—a taste which was natural with his refined intelligence, and which had been strengthened by his long residence in an oriental clime.

He was entering one of the conservatories, when he stepped back with a sudden sense of intrusion upon two individuals who were standing there in deep and earnest conversation,—a conversation so absorbing that they did not notice his presence. One was a lady the very first glance at whose appearance was sufficient to impress the beholder with an idea of rank and distinction. She was dressed with that simple elegance and exquisite refinement of taste which characterized the well-bred woman. The consciousness of high birth and the dignity of position blended sweetly and harmoniously with the perfect loveliness of her countenance and the flowing outlines of her symmetrical shape. Her features, perfect in their profile, had that classic sculptural finish which is so seldom seen: she was a creature of a magnificent beauty—a beauty that fascinated more than it dazzled, and enthralled the soul more than it bewildered the imagination. Her age was about three-and-twenty: she was tall, with a shape of full developed contours, and yet faultlessly symmetrical in the tapering slenderness of the waist. Her hair was of the richest auburn, flowing in glossy lustrous tresses from beneath the elegant Parisian bonnet. Her eyes, of the clearest blue, were large and darkly fringed—the brows delicately pencilled and beautifully arched. One hand had the glove off;—a small white delicate hand it was too; and one of the tapering fingers wore the wedding-ring.

Her companion, who held that beautiful hand tenderly pressed between both his own, was a young man of perfect masculine beauty. He might have been about her own age; and his appearance indicated a distinguished position, as we have already said that her's likewise did. But that he was not her husband, Clement Redcliffe saw at a glance: for though they were unconscious of his presence, yet there was something evidently stealthy in their meeting at that place. No husband would have held her hand as he did: no wife in the presence of a husband would have worn that expression which was visible in her deep blue brooding eyes, and in the passion-breathing lips, which, slightly apart, afforded a glimpse of the pearls within. And he was speaking in a low murmuring voice, but with a tender persuasiveness of the look—as if he were pleading a cause whose only argument was love, and to which she could not yield with honour to herself. The rising and sinking of the shawl folded over her full and swelling bust, denoted the agitation which reigned in her heart: though she stood otherwise perfectly still and motionless, with that fair white hand abandoned to her lover, and with the colour coming and going rapidly upon her beautiful damask cheeks.

Such was the spectacle which Clement Redcliffe beheld almost at the first glance—or at least within the few moments which he lingered upon the threshold of the conservatory. The man who had charge thereof, was attending to a customer at a little distance on the terrace: that tender pair evidently thought themselves altogether alone and unperceived,—snatching perhaps the quick stolen interview of a few minutes—but these few minutes constituting a period in which a whole world of heart's feelings became mutually expressed. Redcliffe caught the words, "Madame Angelique" and "M. Bertin," amidst the otherwise inaudible murmurings of the young man's voice,—inaudible however only to him: for the lady was evidently drinking in with mingled hope and fear—love's passion and alarm—every syllable that came from her companion's lips. Redcliffe turned abruptly away: but glancing through the glass of the conservatory, he saw that the tender couple still remained in precisely the same position—and that so far from their being startled by that movement on his part, his presence had continued utterly unperceived.

"That scene is but too intelligible," he thought to himself, as he proceeded to the conservatory at the other end of the terrace. "There is a young wife not yet lost, but hovering upon the very verge of perdition,—her love getting the better of her sense of duty—the enamoured tempter's persuasiveness proving stronger than her prudence. Would that I dared step between them to save her, and strengthen that lingering virtue which required so much tender pleading on his part to have its last barriers broken down! But no: it is not for me to intervene. There are good deeds which a philanthropist would fain perform—but which, as the world goes, he dares not even approach."

Then it struck Redcliffe as singular that at a moment when he had so little expected to hear it, the name of Madame Angelique should have been mentioned, and coupled too with that of the very person whom he had ere now noticed to be her neighbour. Was it possible that the young man was proposing an assignation, for the carrying out of which the milliner's and the tailor's establishments might be rendered available? Redcliffe was shrewd and intelligent: his experience of the world was too large not to enable him to draw rapid inferences from certain circumstances; and the question which he had just asked himself in respect to the lovers' assignation, became a conviction in his mind. He descended from the terrace, and passed slowly along the arcade lined with those shops where the choicest fruits of English gardens and hothouses, as well as of tropical produce, are so profusely displayed. In a few minutes the lady whom he had seen in the conservatory, passed him by. He at once recognised her by her dress: he glanced at her countenance, and saw that though calm to the superficial observer, yet that it was an assumed and unnatural serenity which to the experienced eye veiled not the agitation that lay beneath. A tall footman in a superb livery, and carrying a gold-headed cane, was lounging in the arcade: but the instant he beheld the beautiful lady approaching, he accosted her with a respectful salutation.

"Has the fruit been sent to the carriage?" she inquired: and Redcliffe, who heard what passed, perceived that there was a clouded tremulousness in her low soft musical voice.

"Yes, my lady," was the response given by the lacquey. "Are there any flowers which your ladyship has ordered?"

"None to-day," was her rejoinder. "I saw not any that pleased my fancy."

No wonder that this titled lady should have forgotten, or else have neglected, her originally proposed purchase of nature's floral beauties: for a sweeter and more delicious flower—love, which is the rose of the soul—had absorbed all her thoughts and engrossed all her time upon the terrace above!

She continued her way through the market, the footman following at a short distance; and when near the end of the arcade, she was suddenly joined by an individual whose almost revolting ugliness formed a perfectly hideous contrast with her own bright and fascinating beauty. He was a man of at least sixty, with large prominent features—a disagreeable and repulsive look; and so totally different from the fair creature who had become the object of Redcliffe's interest, that it was impossible even to believe that he was her father, though more than old enough to claim that title—and very nigh sufficiently so to be her grandfather. His figure was ungainly, and had scarcely the advantages of dress to improve it: for though his raiment was all of the best materials, it nevertheless fitted as if thrown on with a pitchfork. His coat was large and loose—his pantaloons narrow, short, and scanty: and he wore gaiters, which were put on in a slovenly manner. But on the other hand, it was evident that he was very particular and nice with his lavish display of snowy shirt-frill. Such was the individual who joined the lady near the extremity of the arcade which fronts St. Paul's Church.

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," she said, as she took his proffered arm.

"No—certainly not, my angel," he answered, endeavouring to torture his looks and his voice into the tenderest expression of which they were susceptible,—those looks which were so repulsive and that voice which was so harsh and discordant. "I have been turning over all the books in Willis's shop for the last half-hour, without finding what I wanted. Indeed, I was fearful, my sweetest Emily, that I should keep you waiting. And now, are all your purchases sent to the carriage?"

"All," was the response given by the lady; and Redcliffe, who had followed the group, saw the footman hurry on in advance to give a brother-lacquey notice of the approach of their master and mistress; so that the door of the magnificent equipage was ready opened by this time they reached it.

The uxorious old husband—for in this light did he evidently stand towards that young and beautiful lady—handed her in; and when the door closed upon them, he gave the word, "Home!" The two footmen touched their hats, and sprang up behind, each with his gold-headed cane: the stout coachman—who seemed as if having once got on to the box, he had grown to it and could never hope to get down again—just suffered the lash of his whip to touch the backs of the two splendid bay horses which were already pawing the ground, impatient of the delay; and off dashed the superb equipage,—Redcliffe perceiving that an Earl's armorial bearings were blazoned on the panels.

He continued his way in deep thought, and returned to that fashionable street in which the neighbouring establishments of Madame Angelique and M. Bertin was situated. By the time he reached that street, the dusk was closing in—for the reader will recollect that it is the month of January of which we are writing;—and both shops were now a blaze of gaslight. It seemed as if Redcliffe's mind were already made up as to the course which he should pursue; for without the slightest hesitation, he at once turned into the tailor's establishment. M. Bertin was behind the counter: and he received Mr. Redcliffe's orders, which were for some new clothes.

"Have the goodness, sir," said the obsequious Bertin, with his politest bowings and scrapings, "to walk this way:"—and he conducted his new customer into a well-furnished back parlour, where he was wont to measure his distinguished patrons.

Redcliffe was exceedingly profuse in the orders which he gave to M. Bertin; and as a matter of course, he said not a syllable on the subject of price. His object was to make as favourable an impression as possible upon the tailor.

"What name and address, sir, shall I have the honour of entering in my book?" asked M. Bertin, when he had finished the measurement of his new customer: and he was all smiles and bows—for the liberality of Redcliffe's order had won the admiration of the mercenary money-loving Frenchman.

Redcliffe gave the necessary particulars—and then added, "Perhaps, as I am a total stranger to you, you will allow me to leave a cheque upon my banker for whatsoever amount you choose to name?"

"Oh, it is by no means necessary, I can assure you, sir!" responded M. Bertin, with continued smilings and bowings. "I feel highly honoured, sir, in having your name upon my books—and hope long to see it there. Money in advance? Oh, no, sir!—not for the world! Bills sent in every Christmas, sir: those are my terms."

"You will pardon me for having offered you other terms," said Mr. Redcliffe: "but I am comparatively a stranger in England. I have been many, many years abroad——in India," he added, as if quite in a careless manner; although he both foresaw and intended what the effect should be.

"Oh, indeed!—in India, sir!" said M. Bertin, at once catching at the idea that his new customer must be a wealthy nabob. "Ah, sir, fortunes are rapidly made in India."

"Sometimes," observed Redcliffe, still with an air of assumed carelessness—but yet with a sufficient degree of significance to imply that it was so in his own case.

"Not been long in London, therefore, I presume, sir?" said M. Bertin.

"No—only a few months," was the response.

"Beg pardon, sir—but married, I suppose?" continued the tailor, who under a show of garrulity, was always thus wont to fathom the affairs and circumstances of new customers so far as they themselves would allow him. "All rich gentlemen returning from India bring beautiful English wives with them; or else they find them at once on setting foot in their native land."

"Neither happens to be my case, M. Bertin," rejoined Redliffe. "Indeed, I am completely a stranger——"

"Ah, sir, what a pity!" cried the tailor. "Plenty of money, and don't know how to spend it? Beg your pardon, sir—it may seem a very great liberty—but I mean no offence:"—and then as Redcliffe forced his countenance to assume an air of interest in what Bertin was saying to him, the bustling Frenchman closed the parlour door.

"Pray speak candidly," observed Redcliffe: "you need not be afraid of giving me offence. I know that you fashionable tailors at the West End do not always confine your avocations to the mere cutting and fitting of garments—but that you sometimes considerately and kindly help the inexperienced to initiate themselves into the mysteries of London life. Are my ideas correct?"

"Nothing could possibly be more accurate, sir," responded Bertin. "Your name is now upon my books, where I have the honour of chronicling some of the first names of the British aristocracy. Of course, sir, noblemen and gentlemen *will* be gay now and then: but they have a thousand and one reasons for concealing their gaieties as much as possible."

"I understand you, M. Bertin," answered Redcliffe; "and to tell you the truth I am rejoiced that accident should have led me to enter your establishment. It was the handsome exterior which drew my attention. Ah, by the way, there is an equally handsome establishment next door—I happened casually to notice it——"

"Madame Angelique's, sir. An excellent neighbour of mine;"—and M. Bertin bent a significant look upon Redcliffe.

"Madame Angelique?" said the latter, repeating the name with the air of one who thought he had heard it before. "Surely that name is not altogether unfamiliar to me? Ah, I recollect! At an hotel where I was dining, I overheard two young gentlemen at a neighbouring table, mention that name in a subdued tone. It did not particularly strike me at the time——"

"Very indiscreet of those two young gentlemen, whoever they were—very indiscreet indeed!" said M. Bertin, with a look of annoyance: but instantaneously brightening up again, he added, "Fortunately however their imprudent mention of that name was overheard by a gentleman of honour—a man of the world too—such as I perceive that you are, sir——"

"Oh, I should not think of telling tales out of school, whatever they may be," exclaimed Redcliffe. "But frankly speaking, M. Bertin, I begin to be terribly wearied of the monotony of the existence I am leading; and if, as I think I understand, you have the power of giving me a few suggestions in respect to the means of pleasure-pursuit, I shall not merely be grateful, but shall know how to reward you."

The tailor gazed fixedly upon Redcliffe's countenance for a few moments; and satisfied with the survey, he said, "At any time, sir, that you wish to be introduced into the most charming and agreeable female society, pray favour me with a call. You know what I mean—female society of a certain class—but whose intellect and elegance of manners, as well as all drawing-room accomplishments are blended with the most ravishing personal beauty."

"Not for a moment, M. Bertin, will I affect to misunderstand you," answered Redcliffe. "On the contrary, I *do* understand your meaning; and I shall avail myself of your offer. How will you be engaged this evening?"

"I shall be entirely at your orders, sir," responded the sailor, inwardly chuckling at the idea of having got hold of a wealthy nabob, who beneath a severe exterior, concealed the passions and inclinations of a licentious libertine.

"At nine o'clock I will return to pay you a visit," said Mr. Redcliffe.

"You will find me here, sir," responded Bertin: "and then perhaps," he added, with a significant smile, "you shall know something more of Madame Angelique—or at least of the paradise of houris which is as mysteriously concealed within her establishment, as the happy valley of Rasselas was hidden in the midst of mountains."

Redcliffe smiled—nodded in a friendly way to the tailor—and took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

EVELEEN.

PRECISELY at nine o'clock Mr. Redcliffe returned to the tailor's establishment, and found M. Bertin expecting him. The little Frenchman bowed and scraped in his very best style, when Redcliffe thrust a well filled purse in his hand; and the recipient thought within himself that he was destined to turn a pretty penny by the wealthy Indian nabob.

"I will not insult you, sir," he said, as he conducted Redcliffe into his parlour, "by observing that the strictest honour and secrecy are required in respect to those mysteries into which you are about to be initiated. I flatter myself that I am rather skilful in forming opinions of persons at a first glance——"

"You need not be afraid, M. Bertin," interrupted Redcliffe, "that I shall go elsewhere to babble of whatsoever I may see at Madame Angelique's."

"To be sure not, sir! You and I know what the world is," rejoined the tailor, with a significant look; "and a gentleman of your travel and experience is well aware that such establishments as these, are of the greatest convenience."

"The greatest convenience, indeed, I have not the slightest doubt!" exclaimed Redcliffe, somewhat drily.

"Have the goodness, sir, to follow me," said M. Bertin: and he forthwith conducted his new patron up the well carpeted staircase, to that room on the second storey where Annette was always in attendance at certain hours for the reception of visitors.

This woman opened the mysterious mirror-contrived door, and tapped at the one inside,—which was speedily unfolded; and Clement Redcliffe passed on into the luxuriously furnished saloon to which the reader has already been introduced. The four young ladies were not however there at the moment: it was Madame Angelique who gave him admittance: and an introduction was effected by the obsequious tailor,—who immediately afterwards withdrew. But while passing by the milliner, he hurriedly whispered, "A purse with a hundred guineas as my fee! Make much of him!"

Madame Angelique closed the mysterious door, having thus received an intimation of Redcliffe's liberality towards her accomplice the tailor, as well as a hint to the effect that she might, by playing her own cards well, feather her nest to her heart's content.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir," she said, with her most amiable and winning smile, as she opened the door of the apartment.

Redcliffe, purposely assuming as much blandness of manner as he could possibly call to his aid, accompanied Madame Angelique to her own boudoir, to which she led him. She begged him to be seated; and taking a chair near, she began expressing her sense of the honour which she experienced in receiving a patron of whom her friend M. Bertin had spoken so highly. She went on to intimate that as gold evidently was no object to Mr. Redcliffe she could introduce him to some of the most beautiful creatures in the metropolis—not merely those who were dwelling beneath her own roof, but others with whom she was acquainted and to whom she had access

"My friend M. Bertin has hinted to me this evening previous to your arrival, sir," she continued, "that you have been a long time in India. I know not exactly how your taste may be: but I think that I might possibly introduce you to certain paragons of beauty from that same oriental clime——"

"Indeed!" observed Redcliffe, who was determined to glean as much as he possibly could from Madame Angelique. "I should be delighted—and you have been rightly informed that money is no object to me. But who are these paragons of beauty of whom you speak?"

"Oh! it will be no easy matter to accomplish that business," reponded the milliner. "As yet scarcely any steps have been taken; but if I make up my mind to a particular enterprise, I seldom fail in accomplishing it. "You must know, sir," continued the infamous woman, "that my noble and generous patrons make it worth my while to furnish all possible rarities and varieties of female charms; and amongst these patrons I hope to include Mr. Redcliffe."

"Most assuredly," was this gentleman's response. "Now, I see, my dear madam, that between you and me there need not exist any disguise. I am wealthy—and I am addicted to pleasure. I care not how large a price I pay for it. You understand me."

"I do, Mr. Redcliffe," replied Madame Angelique; "and I thank you for speaking so frankly. It is always better."

"And those oriental beauties?"

"As yet I know nothing more of them than that they *are* beauties," continued the milliner "One is comparatively fair, of ravishing loveliness: the other is of dusky complexion, and as handsome in countenance and as finely modelled in form as poet ever imagined."

"Indeed!" said Redcliffe. "And where do they live, these oriental houris of your's?"

"Ah, my dear sir," exclaimed Madame Angelique, tapping Redcliffe familiarly on the arm, "I cannot exactly tell you all my little secrets. But you who have been in India, will doubtless appreciate these rarities; and you will not mind a liberal outlay if I introduce you first to one, and afterwards to the other——Of course I mean beneath this roof. Doubtless the task will be a difficult one: there will be stratagem, machination, inveigling, and so forth: but once *here*——you understand me—for their own credit's sake, they will not afterwards speak of what has occurred."

"Am I to understand that they live together?" inquired Redcliffe; "because if so, the task will perhaps——"

"Be all the more difficult," Madame Angelique hastened to exclaim,—proposing to exact a price commensurate with the amount of obstacle, real or imaginary, which she might eventually be enabled to boast of having overcome.

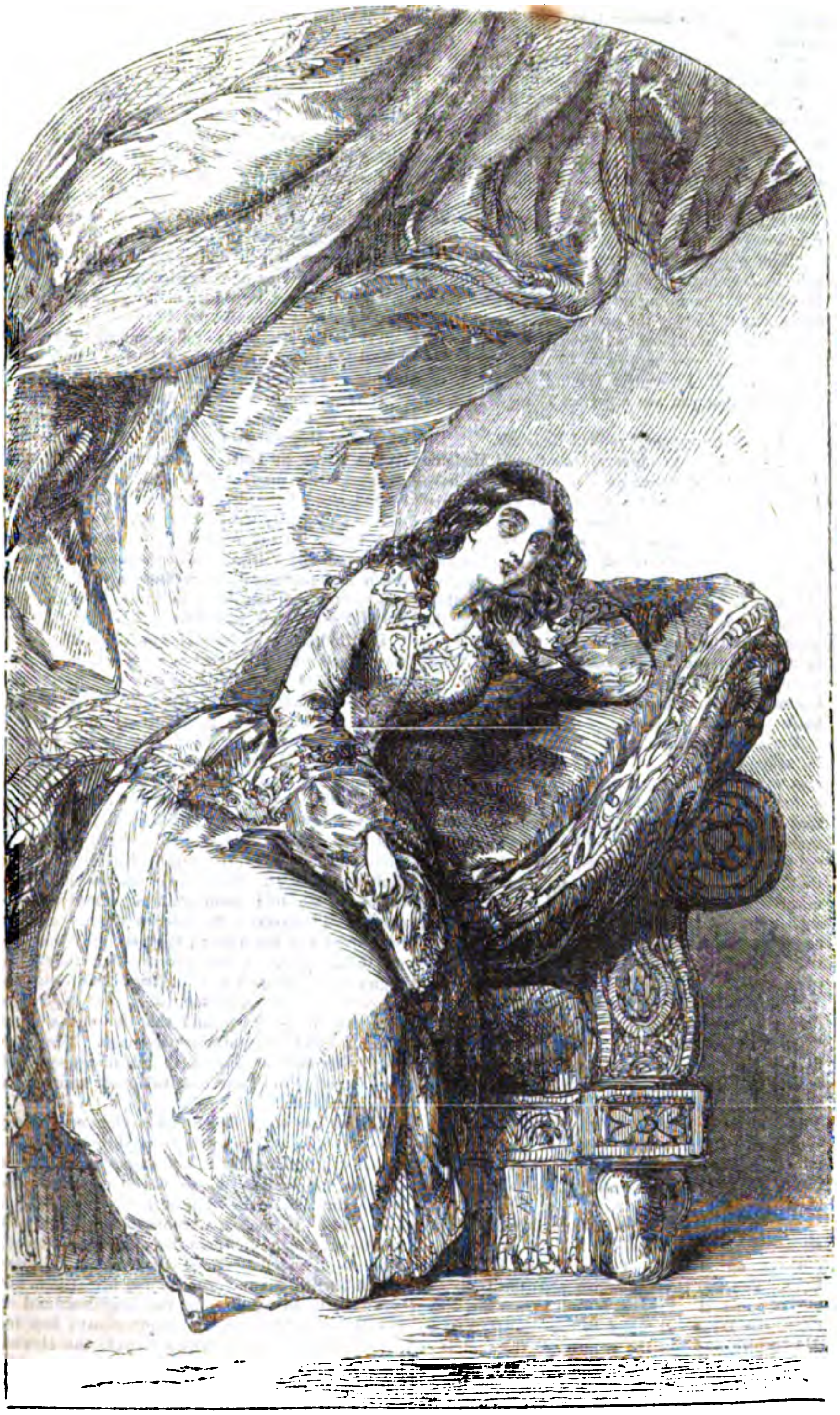
"Yes—they live together: the fairer of the two is the mistress—the darker one is the attendant; and it is in a suburb of London that they reside. But more than this you must really not expect to know for the present," added Madame Angelique, with a smile.

"Oh, I will not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, my dear madam," exclaimed Redcliffe. "By all means let me be considered as the one who is to be fortunate enough——"

"It is a bargain, sir," interrupted the milliner; "and shall be fulfilled."

"But," continued Redcliffe, "in whatever steps you may take with regard to these oriental paragons, remember that my name——"

"Good heavens, my dear sir, not for the world!" cried Madame Angelique. "I am discretion personified! Your name shall not be mentioned. I cannot promise that success will be speedily accomplished. As yet I have learned but little more than the fact of these charming creatures' existence in London. Yes — I have satisfied myself



LADY LASCELLES.

that they *are* the beauties they have been represented——"

"But you have not as yet spoken to them?" interjected Redcliffe, as if with a careless manner.

"Oh, no!—they are all but inaccessible, and this constitutes the first difficulty that has to be encountered. Nevertheless, I am not to be frightened by such obstacles. And now, as we are speaking with frankness, Mr. Redcliffe, I must tell you something."

"To be sure—in all frankness," was this gentleman's response.

"You already know," continued Madame Angelique, drawing her chair a little closer towards Redcliffe, and assuming an air of mysterious confidence, "that I enjoy the patronage of some of the highest and wealthiest personages in the realm. By the bye, do you happen to be acquainted—— But no! If I recollect aright, M. Bertin assured me that you are a perfect stranger in London."

"A perfect stranger," replied Redcliffe.

"I was about to observe," continued Madame Angelique, "that to one only of my patrons have I previously mentioned anything concerning these oriental women; and he has charged me to keep them for him. In a word, sir, his Grace——I mean the personage of whom I speak, has promised me no less a sum than a thousand guineas."

"And I, Madame Angelique," exclaimed Redcliffe, "unhesitatingly promise you double the amount, on the mere faith of your representations in respect to the extraordinary beauty of these women. Would you have an earnest of my liberality? It is here:"—and he flung down a bank-note upon the table.

Madame Angelique gracefully inclined her head in acknowledgment of the retaining fee; and glancing rapidly at the note, could scarcely repress a start of surprise and exultation when she saw that it was for five hundred pounds. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession—as she did not choose to suffer her new patron to perceive that, well though she was paid by others, she was nevertheless but little accustomed to a display of such munificence as this—she observed, "It is a compact, Mr. Redcliffe; and not to another soul will I speak of that Indian lady and her dark-eyed Ayah."

"No—there must be the strictest honour in our dealings, Madame Angelique," responded Redcliffe; "and if you play me false, I shall never more set foot in your establishment. But what guarantee have I that you will not suffer me to be forestalled by him to whom you have previously spoken? You ere now let a word drop, showing me that he is a Duke; and how can I possibly hope to compete with a personage of such high rank, and no doubt of such wealth, as his Grace to whom you have alluded?"

"It is all a matter of honour, Mr. Redcliffe," answered Madame Angelique!—"no, not of honour—of self-interest. There! I put it in that light. You will pay me double what the Duke has offered; and the bargain is your's—not his. Besides, the Duke has gone to his country-seat in Hampshire, and will not return till the middle of February. In the meantime we may perhaps bring matters to an issue."

From this discourse Clement Redcliffe had no difficulty in comprehending that the Duke to whom the infamous woman alluded was his Grace of Marchmont.

"Well, Madame Angelique," he said, "I put faith in your words. And now, with your permission——"

"I understand you, sir," she interrupted him, with a meaning smile. "There are at this moment four beautiful young ladies in my house——and by the bye, one of them, a splendid creature, is going down into the neighbourhood of that very Duke's country-seat in the course of a few days. This is between you and me. You will see her presently. Her name is Lettice Rodney."

"By all means, introduce me to your four beauties," observed Redcliffe.

"Have the kindness to follow me, sir. They will doubtless be in the saloon by this time: they were performing their toilet when you arrived."

Thus speaking, Madame Angelique rose from her seat, and led the way out of the boudoir. She conducted Redcliffe to the saloon; and having introduced him to Lettice, Armantine, Linda, and Eveleen, with many smiles and simperings, she retired, closing the door after her. The four girls were as elegantly dressed as when we first presented them to the reader: the table was covered with wines and refreshments—the atmosphere was warm and perfumed—every feature of the scene was but too well calculated to infuse heat into the blood of the coldest anchorite.

But Redcliffe experienced no such fervour. There was a deep sense of disgust in his mind,—a disgust at the gilded iniquities into which he was being initiated—a disgust too at the part which circumstances had led him to perform. He nevertheless assumed the most cheerful air that he could possibly put on. He sat down in the midst of the meretricious group, and at once glided into conversation with them. He soon discovered that they were well-bred, intelligent, and accomplished; and that they were as fully able to converse on intellectual matters as to fritter away the time in vain shallow frivolities. He spoke of his travels in far-off lands—he told them amusing anecdotes—he exerted all his powers to interest them. At first they liked not his aspect; they thought that he was haughty, stern, and severe:—but they soon began to exchange rapid and significant glances amongst themselves, to the effect that they were agreeably disappointed, and that he was a most delightful and entertaining personage. They had already received a hint as to his liberality; and they therefore did their best to appear amiable on their own side.

But all the while Redcliffe was thus conversing with them, he was in reality studying their individual dispositions and characters so far as it was possible for him to do so under circumstances which threw an artificial gloss to a certain extent over them. He had a purpose to carry out; and he required one of these females as an agent. Fain would he have decided upon addressing himself to Lettice, inasmuch as he had learnt that she was shortly to repair into the neighbourhood of the Duke of Marchmont's country-seat: but he saw something in her which forbade the idea of his making this young woman his confidante. He felt assured that she was not to be trusted. Next he studied the German girl, Linda; but he saw that she was of a sensuous and luxurious temperament, and that she was therefore unfitted for the influences which he purposed to bring to bear upon the one who should be the object of his choice. He directed his attention to the French girl, Armantine: but exquisitely beautiful though she were, and delicately classical as were her features, there was nevertheless a certain flashing of the eyes which denoted insincerity—and his thoughts settled not upon her. There was but one left; and this was Eveleen the Irish girl. There was something ingenuous in her looks — something frank and honest in the expression of her eyes: and then too, he ever and anon observed a cloud gathering over her features at certain anecdotes which he purposely related, and which had the effect of bringing back visions of home to the memories of these lost ones. Eveleen therefore became the object of his choice.

They all sat down at the table; and Mr. Redcliffe in the course of an hour drank more wine than he had altogether done for years past. But this he was compelled to do, lest any suspicion of an ulterior intent should arise in the minds of the three who were to be excluded from his confidence. Nevertheless the libations of champagne clouded not his intellect—much less overpowered it: his own strong will was more powerful than the influence of wine. He made Eveleen sit next to him; and though courteous enough to all four, his principal attentions were devoted to her. This seemed significant; and after a while, Lettice, Linda, and Armantine withdrew from the saloon.

Redcliffe was now alone with Eveleen. She rose and made a movement towards a door at the farther extremity, and which communicated with a voluptuously furnished chamber.

"Resume your seat," said Mr. Redcliffe: "I wish to speak to you."

The girl, who was for a moment astonished that he did not at once rise and follow her, naturally fancied that he wished to prolong the pleasures of the table: and returning to her chair, she was about to refill his glass.

"No—we have had enough wine," said Redcliffe, in a kind though firm and decisive tone.

Eveleen gazed upon him with renewed astonishment; and for a few moments he remained absorbed in thought.

"Tell me," he presently said, "how long have you been here?"

"About three years, sir," she answered; and again the cloud lowered for a moment over her features, which were naturally of so sprightly and piquant an expression.

"Three years," continued Redcliffe mournfully, —"three years of sin for one who by her beauty and her intelligence, her manners and her accomplishments, might have adorned the highest sphere of society, had she remained virtuous!"

"Oh, do not speak to me in this way!" cried Eveleen almost petulantly: for Redcliffe's words, as well as the tone in which they were uttered, had sunk deep down into her very soul.

"It is not a reproach, much less an insult that I am addressing you," he said, in a still kinder voice. "You will perhaps live to bless the day when you thus encountered me—or I have very erroneously read your character and disposition. Tell me—and speak candidly—are there not time when your memory is carried back to a bright and happy home?"

"Good heavens, sir, why do you talk thus?" exclaimed Eveleen. "Who are you? wherefore came you hither? Is it possible——"

"It is possible, my poor girl," responded Redcliffe, "that I may have come hither with some object very different from that which was supposed — very different indeed from the objects which men have in penetrating into such a place as this. But before I explain myself, tell me, Eveleen—have you parents?"

The Irish girl burst into tears: she endeavoured to check them—but vainly: she could not. The more she strove, the less was her power to command her feelings: they convulsed her.

"Yes," resumed Redcliffe, "I see that you have parents, who are doubtless deploring the disappearance of a beloved daughter. Would you not like to be restored to them?"

"Oh, I would give up twenty years of my life to pass but a few in that once happy home!"—and the unfortunate girl sobbed bitterly.

"In me, Eveleen," said Redcliffe, "you shall find a friend—a real friend—a friend who will lift you up from degradation, instead of helping to plunge you farther down—a friend who will do all he can for you—if you yourself be accessible to the influences of such pure and well meant friendship."

By a strange but very natural revulsion of feeling, Eveleen grew calm. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and gazed upon Mr. Redcliffe with mingled amazement, gratitude and admiration. Long was it since her ears had drunk in such language as this: long was it since such balm had been poured down into her heart!

"Do not think," he continued, "that you are so far lost it is not worth while to return into a virtuous course. I am well aware that such is too often the fatal error to which fallen woman clings. She thinks that by the very fact of her fall, insurmountable barriers have suddenly sprung up between herself and the pathway from which she has diverged,—barriers which she may vainly attempt to climb in order to re-enter it. But it is not so. True, when a coronal of purity has fallen from the brow, it can never be replaced!—true, that chastity once lost cannot be regained! But this is no reason for a perseverance in sin; and so great is the merit of abandoning the path of error, that it goes far towards a complete atonement for the past. The arms of parents may be opened to welcome back again a lost daughter, if she return to them in penitence and in sorrow for her misdeeds. Eveleen, you are not deficient in intelligence:—am I not speaking truly?"

The poor Irish girl gave no verbal answer: but she fell upon her knees at Redcliffe's feet—and taking his hand, gazed up at him in a manner which was expressive of a fervid gratitude for the promise he seemed to hold out—of entreaty that he would perform it—but of suspense lest it were a happiness too great for her to know. All the contrition of a Magdalen was in that look. The waters of life had not been dried up in that girl's heart: their issue had been merely closed by the circumstances of her position: but now the rock was smitten with the magic rod which kind words can ever wield; and she felt as for three long years past she had not felt before! There was a world of sentiment in that look with which she gazed up into Redcliffe's countenance—a look which once beheld, never could be forgotten.

"Rise, my poor girl," he said, profoundly affected. "I see that I have not been deceived in you—and I will be your friend."

"But my parents, sir—Oh, my parents!" exclaimed Eveleen, with an almost suffocating outburst of emotions,—"how will they be brought to receive their dishonoured daughter?"

"If they possess the hearts and the feelings of parents," responded Mr. Redcliffe, "rest assured that you have nothing to fear. I will cheerfully undertake the task of seeing them: I will go to them—I will reason with them—I will entreat them——in a word, if they be not something less or something more than human, I will procure their forgiveness for their daughter, should she be really penitent!"

"My saviour! my deliverer!" cried Eveleen, with another outburst of impassioned feeling: "how can I ever sufficiently thank you? Oh, that I could do anything to testify my gratitude!"

"You can," rejoined Redcliffe.

"I can?" cried the girl, joy animating her countenance. "Oh, tell me but how, sir, and the cheerfulness with which I will obey your commands—the zeal and the fidelity with which I will execute your orders—the unasking devotion and even the very blindness with which I will be guided by your will, shall serve as the first proofs of that contrition whereof I have assured you!"

"Listen then," said Mr. Redcliffe: "listen with a calm attention. You know the Duke of Marchmont?"

"I do, sir," responded Eveleen, a blush mantling upon her cheeks: then in a hesitating voice, she added, "When I was beguiled from my home in Ireland, and brought to this house, it was he to whom I first became a victim!"

"The Duke of Marchmont," continued Redcliffe, "is engaged in certain treacherous pursuits into which it deeply concerns me to obtain an insight. That infamous woman Madame Angelique is his accomplice, or at least his agent. Something is going on wherein she is mixed up. Next Tuesday evening a box is to be fetched away, under circumstances of mystery and precaution, by a young man in the Duke of Marchmont's employment. Have you an opportunity of watching the affairs which progress in this establishment? do you consider it possible to obtain any intelligence, no matter how slight it may be, as to the mystery connected with that box?"

"I will endeavour, sir," responded Eveleen; "rest assured that I will endeavour. Yes," she continued thoughtfully, "I have no doubt I can obtain some insight into what is going on. At all events, be assured, sir, that I will do my best. Oh, I should be so rejoiced to give you a proof of my gratitude—of my penitence!"

"You must remain here for a few days longer," observed Redcliffe. "This is my address:"—and as he thus spoke he gave Eveleen his card. "Come to me on Wednesday morning next, under any circumstances. If in the mean time you should have discovered aught relative to the box, so much the better: but if not, you will come all the same—you shall continue no longer within these walls. Can you leave when you choose? and will you accomplish all that I have suggested?"

"On Wednesday, sir," rejoined Eveleen, "I will be with you:"—and her countenance expressed all the genuine joy which she felt at the prospect of emancipation from a mode of existence which was abhorrent to her.

"Be it so," said Redcliffe. "And now, to keep up appearances, I shall leave money upon this table. Remember, I am putting faith in you—I will prove your friend, if you show yourself worthy of my confidence."

"No power on earth, sir, could induce me to deceive you!" responded Eveleen, with fervour.

Mr. Redcliffe threw a number of bank-notes upon the table; and shaking Eveleen by the hand, he took his departure,—the girl affording him egress by means of the mirror-contrived door. The tailor's female-adjutant Annette was waiting in the room of the adjoining house wherewith that door communicated: Redcliffe slipped a piece of gold into her hand; and in a few minutes he was retracing his way along the street towards his lodgings at Mrs. Macaulay's.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE EARL OF LASCELLES.

We are about to direct the reader's attention to a sumptuously furnished mansion in the neighbourhood of Kensington. It stood in the midst of its own grounds, which were spacious and inclosed with walls. Within that inclosure there were beautiful gardens, which even in this wintry season of which we are writing, presented an aspect of verdure to the eye, on account of the numerous evergreens which were either interspersed about, or which bordered the avenues. Conservatories and hot-houses, containing fruits and plants, also met the view. There were grass-plats too, and pieces of ornamental water; and the entire aspect of the scene—buildings and grounds—indicated the wealth of the possessor.

This mansion belonged to the Earl of Lascelles; and we may at once inform our reader that he was the nobleman whom Redcliffe had seen join his beautiful wife in the Arcade at Covent Garden. The Earl had been married twice. By his first wife he had a son, who was now grown up to man's estate, and who bore the denomination of Lord Osmond. His mother had died some few years previously to the period of which we are writing; and it was only within the last eighteen months that the Earl had espoused his second wife, the beautiful Ethel. This lady, belonging to a good family, had been left an orphan at an early age, and was brought up by an uncle and aunt, who had a large family of their own. Though tolerably well off, they found quite enough to do with their resources; and as Ethel was portionless, she had been constrained by the circumstances of her position, as well as by the earnest persuasion of her relatives, to accept the suit of the Earl of Lascelles, who offered her a title and to make her the sharer of his fortune of sixty thousand a-year. It must be added that this sacrifice of a young and lovely creature to an old and repulsive-looking man, was not aggravated in its severity by any pre-engagement of Ethel's affections; and it was therefore fortunate for her that in bestowing her hand where it was impossible she could love, she had not to deplore ruined hopes and a withered attachment in any other quarter. She accepted her destiny with as much resignation as possible—and perhaps with more so than if she had been born in a humbler sphere: for in that fashionable world wherein she moved, she had been by no means unaccustomed to contemplate the spectacle of young and beautiful creatures like herself, sacrificed to the selfish and interested views of parents. She did not therefore stand alone in this martyrdom of marriage to which she was made a victim; and there is always a sort of solace in the reflection that one's own lot, however disagreeable, forms not a complete exception to the general rule.

The Earl of Lascelles was however by no means a man, either in person or in disposition, to win the love or esteem of a beautiful and intelligent young lady of Ethel's age. He was attached to her as old men usually are to wives juvenile enough to be their daughters, or indeed their granddaughters: that is to say, he doated upon her with an uxoriousness that displayed itself in a ridiculous manner, even in public; and his assiduities to please her were wearisome and obtrusive. She really had no whims or caprices; but he treated her as if she had a thousand,—constantly heaping gifts upon her which she did not want or could not use. He would buy her shawls of the costliest price and of the gayest colours—jewellery which was totally incompatible with existing fashions and with the peculiar elegance of her own toilet; and then he would be annoyed because she did not wear those things. But if these were his only failings, she needed not much to repine: it was his character generally which was enough to wear out her patience and frequently inspire her with disgust. For the Earl was one of the most consummate boasters and braggarts in all England—and withal too the greatest romancist. We do not mean the reader to infer that he wrote books: nothing of the sort!—his ignorance on all literary matters was deplorable. But we use the term "romancist" as a more courteous expression than that of "liar," which might however be very well and properly applied; inasmuch as his lordship shot with a bow longer than even the greatest of travellers, who are accustomed to tell strange tales, are privileged to use. When quite a young man, he had served in the army, and reached the rank of Captain: but the death of his father, by raising him to the Earldom, led him to abandon the profession. Nothing he loved so much as to sit for hours in Ethel's society and endeavour to amuse her with his exploits when he was a military man,—with the wonders he beheld when he travelled abroad, or even with the deeds of his most youthful days; and as she perfectly well understood that he was indulging in a tissue of the most egregious falsehoods, she at times experienced much trouble in concealing her disgust. It was just the same when they had company, or when they visited their friends and acquaintances: he would go on giving utterance to boast after boast—lie after lie—totally inobservant of the smiles of either contemptuous pity or downright scorn which he conjured up to the lips of his listeners. Thus Ethel frequently found herself in a most painful position: for it was bad enough to have a husband so old and so ugly, without the additional annoyance of seeing him rendering himself so supremely ridiculous. When they were alone together, he was continuously lavishing upon her his nauseating caresses: and he would often affect a childish sportiveness—talking nonsense—playing tricks—performing antics—and gambolling as if he were a little fellow of a dozen years old. The Earl's was not therefore a character or a disposition to promote Ethel's happiness, to win her esteem or her love, or to compensate for his own age and his ugliness.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of the day after Redcliffe's adventures at Madame Angelique's house, that we shall find the Earl of Lascelles seated in his dressing-room, undergoing the process of shaving, which was being performed upon him by his confidential valet. This man was about forty years of age—endowed with a consummate hypocrisy—and who had obtained a complete ascendancy over his master by pandering to his vanity, listening patiently to his stories, and appearing to put the utmost faith in them. His manners were fawning, cringing, and servile: he never contradicted the Earl, but invariably echoed whatsoever his lordship said, and studied to give precisely such an answer as any question that was put might seem framed to elicit. He was bustling, active, and perfectly conversant in all the duties he had to perform. These were multifarious enough; inasmuch as they comprised all the mysteries of his noble master's toilet.

Makepeace—for this was the valet's name (and it was believed to be a feigned one, the particular nomenclature being chosen to give an additionally harmonious gloss to all his assumed attributes),—Makepeace, we say, was at once his lordship's perruquier—his barber—his doctor—and in some sense his tailor. It was Makepeace who dressed his lordship's wig in such a style that his lordship firmly believed the assurance that it looked, if anything, even more natural than his own hair would have done if he had not the misfortune to be bald. It was Makepeace who shaved his lordship so clean that his lordship's finger might pass over his chin without encountering the stubble of a single hair. It was Makepeace who caused to be made up at the chemist's, according to receipts of his own, the medicines which his lordship took to keep him in health and to sustain a juvenescent appearance. It was Makepeace who compounded washes and cosmetics to improve his lordship's complexion, and to keep away pimples. It was Makepeace likewise, who from time to time was closeted in solemn conference with his lordship's tailor, showing where such and such padding ought to be placed:—and yet throughout the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as in the Principality of Wales, or indeed any other part of the Queen's dominions, it would be impossible to discover a worse-dressed man than the Earl of Lascelles. His lordship however thought otherwise: Makepeace persuaded him that it was as he thus thought; and therefore if his lordship were satisfied, nobody else had a right to find fault. As for the personal appearance of this said Makepeace, we may add that he had naturally a sharp, cunning, hypocritical look,—of which he was perfectly conscious, and which he therefore endeavoured to conceal as much as possible beneath such artificial gloss as the blandest smiles, the most honied speech, and the most obsequious manners could possibly constitute.

It was, then, as we have said, at nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Lascelles, having emerged from the bed-chamber in his dressing-gown and slippers, and with his white cotton night-cap on his head, sat down in his elegantly furnished dressing-room to commence the process of the toilet. We should observe that the white cotton night-cap was fringed all around with hair, of precisely the same sort and description as that of which his lordship's wigs were composed; and he actually flattered himself that his beautiful Countess firmly believed he had a fine natural crop of his own hair upon his head. Indeed, Makepeace had assured him that the fringe round the night-cap was a masterpiece of art; and it was quite consistent that Makepeace should say so, inasmuch as the device was of his own invention, and it was a part of his duty to stitch the fringes inside the night-caps when they were delivered to him by the laundry-woman. The dressing-room contained numerous cupboards and chests of drawers, which were always kept carefully locked, —Makepeace retaining the keys, so that none of the other servants should penetrate into the mysteries of those receptacles. Wigs and cosmetics, night-cap fringes and medicines, anti-pimple washes and padded garments, false teeth and whisker-dyes, books for the preservation of health and Guides to the toilet, formed the miscellaneous contents of those drawers and cupboards; and Mr. Makepeace turned, in addition to his handsome salary, a very pretty penny indeed in his capacity of paymaster for all those things on the Earl's behalf.

"How do I look this morning, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, as he sat opposite a full-length mirror, with his hair-fringed night-cap on his head, his short shrivelled frame enveloped in a gorgeous French silk dressing-gown, and his feet thrust into red morroco slippers.

"How strange, my lord!" exclaimed the valet, but only in a subdued voice, and in accents most harmoniously bland; "that I should have been just at the very moment thinking I had never seen your lordship look better for the last ten years."

"Is it ten years that you have been with me, Makepeace?" inquired the nobleman, grinning like an antiquated goat at the compliment which his valet paid him.

"Yes, my lord: it is ten years," answered Makepeace, with a profound sigh, which he purposely rendered as audible as possible.

"What makes you sigh?" asked the Earl.

"It is enough to make me sigh, my lord," rejoined the valet, "when I look at myself in the glass, and then look at your lordship. Ten years have made a wonderful alteration in me: but they really seem as if they had passed over your lordship without leaving the slightest influence behind them."

"Hem! I think I wear well," said the nobleman. "Time, you see, is very good to me—he forgets me."

"Considering your lordship is close upon your forty-fifth year," said Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that the Earl would never see sixty again,—"I think your lordship has some little reason to be grateful to Time."

"Well, I think so, too. But frankly speaking Makepeace—and I know that you will answer me with your accustomed candour—do I look more than forty-five? Could a close observer have any reason to suspect that I am a day older? Not that I am, you know: but there are men who at my age look as if they were—what shall I say? ——sixty! And then too, that *Peerage* tells such horrid lies. I shall have the author of it brought to the bar of the House of Lords for breach of privilege."

"Let me beseech your lordship to treat the unfortunate man with the contempt he deserves," said Makepeace, assuming an air of humane and philanthropic entreaty. "I dare say he has only put down your lordship so much older than your lordship can possibly be, because your lordship did not send him a cheque for a hundred guineas or so."

"That's the truth of it!" cried the Earl: "so I shall let the rascal alone. Besides, a young man like me—looking even younger, too, on account of the possession of such a youthful and beautiful wife—can afford to laugh at the wretched malignity of a fellow who sets me down at sixty. And I will explain to you how the mistake has arisen—if indeed it be a mistake, and not sheer wickedness. Did I ever tell you at what age I was first married?"

"I think I have heard it said that your lordship was married at fifteen," answered Makepeace.

"Exactly so!" exclaimed the Earl; "and I was a father at sixteen. "But then, you see, I was precocious for my age. Why, I was only sixteen, three months and a half, when I had that terrible encounter with the five highwaymen on Bagshot Heath."

"I have read the account of it, my lord, in an old newspaper," responded Makepeace. "I think, if I remember right, your lordship killed two of them, and led the other three, bound hand and foot, in triumph into Hounslow."

"Those were the very facts of the case," exclaimed the Earl: "I see that you must have read them. I was only seventeen when I cut my way through the French regiment of cuirassiers—killed the trumpet-major, who was seven feet high—took the colonel prisoner—and carried off the colours."

"That achievement, my lord, is duly recorded in history," answered Makepeace. "It was only the other day I was reading of it in a history of the late war. Your lordship must have been in a dreadful state of excitement after such an exploit?"

"Not a bit of it!" cried the Earl. "I was as cool as a cucumber; and when I got the cuirassier colonel to the camp, I challenged him——"

"To mortal combat, my lord?"

"No—to a drinking bout. I was terrible in those days for my achievements with the bottle The colonel had the reputation of drinking more at a sitting than any other man in the French army; but I beat him. We sat down at table, piling the bottles around us as we emptied them: and we heaped them up so high in a circle round about us, that when the colonel dropped down dead drunk, I got up—as sober as I am now—and had literally to dash down a wall of bottles before I could get out of the place."

"Your lordship's head must have ached very much the next morning?" said Makepeace.

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated the Earl. "I recollect I was up at five o'clock, and rode the celebrated steeple-chase in which I beat the whole field—won the ten thousand guinea stakes—and killed that celebrated horse of mine that was sent me as a present by the Pasha of Egypt for discovering the source of the Nile."

"Your lordship travelled early in life," said Makepeace, with the air of a man who was so deeply interested in his master's exploits that he anxiously sought for farther information.

"Yes—I travelled early," said the Earl, in a complacent and self-satisfied way. "I left college when I was thirteen, and set off on a walking tour through Africa and Asia. Of course I could not manage my tour on the Continent of Europe, because we were at war at the time."

"The deserts of Africa, my lord, must have been unpleasant?" remarked Makepeace, inquiringly.

"Yes—for your milk-and-water travellers, who cannot bear hardships," replied the Earl: "but I cared nothing for them. I caught a wild elephant—tamed him—and rode on his back; so, you see, that it was not altogether a walking tour. I was somewhat troubled with lions and tigers, which swarm as thick as mosquitoes in that country: but I was always on the alert in the day-time; and at night, when I chose to travel—which I chiefly did, on account of the coolness of the night-air—I contrived a portable fire, which the elephant carried with his trunk, and so it frightened off the wild beasts."

"Exceedingly strange, my lord!" exclaimed Makepeace: "but I was reading an account of this remarkable mode of travelling the other day; and as no name was mentioned, I was at a loss to conceive who the traveller could have been. I thank your lordship for the information: it has cleared up the mystery."

"So you see," continued the Earl, "that when I was very young, I encountered a great number of strange adventures. Mine has been an extraordinary life; and for comparatively a young man, I can look back upon a great deal. Did you ever hear of my first speech in the House, when I succeeded to the title?"

"I think I have heard of the wonderful effect it produced, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"Effect, indeed!" ejaculated the nobleman. "It was on a very important subject. Some noble Lord—I forget who he was—brought forward a motion that the Lord Chancellor, who was afraid of an apoplectic fit, should be permitted to sit without his wig. There was a crowded House, and all the first talents displayed themselves on the occasion. It was just going to a division at eleven o'clock at night, when the *Contents* would have carried it: but I, who very well knew that the whole mystery of the British Constitution and the safety of Church and State were involved in the question, rose to say a few words."

"But I dare say they were *not* a few words," interjected Makepeace, with a smirking smile, "which your lordship had to utter on so vital an occasion."

"Well, to confess the truth," answered the Earl, "I did only intend to say a few words: I did not know my own oratorical powers at that time: indeed I scarcely suspected them. But when I found myself on my legs, I was hurried away as if by a tornado. I can compare it to nothing but a perfect hurricane of language, bearing along with it myriads of brilliant stars of metaphor. The very wig of the Chancellor himself—that wig which was the subject of the memorable debate—stood on end. The perspiration ran down my face, so that all my clothes were saturated as if I had plunged into a hot bath: and, by the bye, I found on weighing myself next morning, that I had lost seven pounds of flesh. It was terrific! I began at eleven o'clock; and it was half-past three in the morning when I sat down—the longest debate and the longest speech on record!"

"I need not ask whether your lordship carried the day," observed Makepeace: "for history records the result."

"To be sure! The whole House became *Non-Content* in a moment after I sat down; and the Lord Chancellor never forgave me. It was all through his vindictive machinations that the King did not send for me to be Prime Minister a few months afterwards: but his Majesty wrote me the handsomest apology, explaining how he would rather have me at the head of his councils than any statesman in England, but that he did not dare offend the old Chancellor. I have got the King's letter still: I will show it to you one of these days."

"Her ladyship ought to be very proud of such a husband," observed Makepeace.

"To be sure she ought!—and I believe she is. What is your opinion?"

"It is a delicate subject, my lord," responded the valet with a simulated hesitation: "but still I do happen to know that her ladyship *is* proud of the alliance which she has so happily—and I may add, so gloriously formed."

"Come, tell me, my good fellow, how do you happen to know this?"

"Why, my lord, servants will get talking together—I hope your lordship will not be angry——"

"No, no: I shall look over it. Go on. Perhaps her ladyship's maids——"

"That is exactly what it is, my lord. It was only yesterday they were telling me," continued Makepeace, "how her ladyship speaks to them of your lordship when they are alone together."

"Her ladyship does not suspect, does she——come tell me the truth now—I know you would not deceive me—but does her ladyship suspect anything about *this?*" and the Earl significantly twitched the hair-fringe of his night-cap with his finger and thumb.

"Not for a moment, my lord!" ejaculated Makepeace. "On the contrary, her ladyship was telling her maids the other day——But I am afraid I shall give your lordship offence."

"No, no—I will overlook this little gossiping. I know that it does take place amongst servants. Go on. What did her ladyship say?"

"That your lordship actually looked younger than my Lord Osmond."

"Ah! she said that, did she?" exclaimed the Earl, his wrinkled countenance expanding into one elaborate grin of satisfaction. "You know, Makepeace, there has been a great coolness between me and my son since my marriage. All the estates, as you are aware, are not entailed; and of course I have the power of leaving them to whomsoever I think fit."

"It was very wrong of his lordship," said Makepeace, "if I may be so bold as to offer an opinion—to show any disrespect towards your lordship, because having won the affections of a young and beautiful lady, your lordship chose to consult your own happiness by espousing her ladyship."

"It *was* very wrong!" exclaimed the Earl. "But between you and me, I was not sorry to have an opportunity to forbid my son the house. You see, Makepeace, it is rather an awkward thing where there is a youthful mother-in-law and an equally youthful step-son. The world is so scandalous—and then too, it is always better to be prudent. There is another reason likewise. Lord Osmond looks older than he really is; and it makes me look older in consequence. But as for the former part of my reasoning, her ladyship, you know, is virtue personified."

"If I might be permitted the expression, my lord," answered Makepeace, "her ladyship can only be on this earth by some extraordinary mistake. It is not her sphere, my lord. Her ladyship is an angel."

"Exactly so!" cried the old nobleman. "Don't you think, Makepeace, I ought to be the happiest man in the world?"

"If I were to give free expression to my thoughts, my lord," rejoined the valet, "I should say that this world ought to appear a perfect paradise in your lordship's eyes."

"And so it does, Makepeace—a perfect paradise—an elysium of the most delicious flowers. Give me my wig."

The valet could scarcely suppress a smile for a moment, at the ludicrous transition of his lordship's ideas from the elysium of flowers to his wig: but that smile was not caught by the Earl's eye, as it instantaneously vanished from the countenance of Makepeace.

"Now, I think, I look as I ought to do," said the nobleman whose toilet having progressed during the preceding colloquy, was by this time brought to a termination. "Are you sure that this new peruke does not *look new?*"

"Not at all, my lord," replied Makepeace: "it becomes your lordship admirably."

"And yet it strikes me," said the Earl dubiously, "that it is a shade lighter than the one I have been recently wearing. Put them together, and give me your opinion."

The valet did as he was desired, but purposely held the old wig in such a light against the new one, that the Earl's eye should not detect the difference. The latter was however in reality a shade or two lighter than the former; but Makepeace spoke so confidently in the opposite sense, that his lordship, who took his valet's word to be gospel in all toilet-matters, was satisfied; and assuming as jaunty and debonnair a demeanour as possible, he descended to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER XXX.

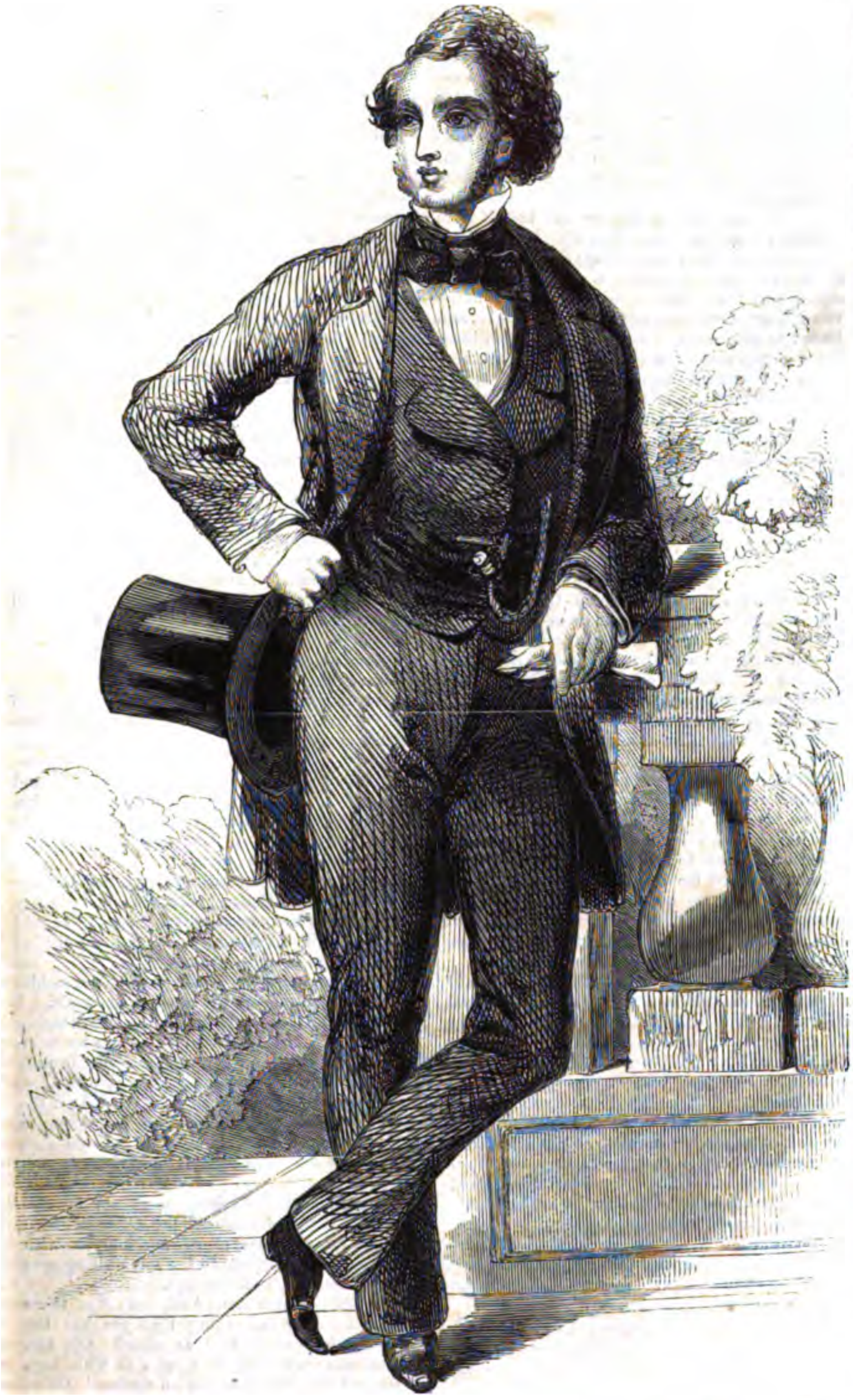
THE COUNTESS OF LASCELLES.

LET us now change the scene to another room in the same mansion, and to a much later hour in the day. It was a sumptuously furnished apartment; and the time was two o'clock.

The Countess of Lascelles sat upon a sofa in a thoughtful mood. She was alone; and the perfect immovability of her form and features for a period of several minutes indicated how completely she was absorbed in her reflections. Her exquisitely symmetrical figure was inclined towards the immense velvet-covered cushion on which her elbow rested, the hand supporting the head. The luxuriant tresses of her auburn hair, rich and glossy, floated in natural undulations over her shoulders; and a few straggling curls lay like burnished gold on her pure white throat. Exquisitely beautiful was her countenance, as we have already described it: for she was the lady, as the reader comprehends, whom Clement Redcliffe saw on his visit to Covent Garden Market, and in whose proceedings with the handsome young man he became so much interested. There was a deep pensiveness in her large clear blue eyes; and yet after the lapse of a few minutes, a soft smile appeared upon the roses of the well-cut lips, partially revealing the pearly whiteness of the teeth. It would have been evident to an observer—if one were nigh—that though pensive, her thoughts were not altogether fraught with melancholy, but that there was a roseate light shining softly through.

As she sat half reclining upon that sofa, the dark velvet covering threw out her well-defined and faultlessly symmetrical shape. The voluptuous swell of the bust—the tapering of the waist, which seemed still more slender on account of the luxurious proportions of the bosom—the admirably sloping shoulders—the narrow sleeves, which did not altogether conceal the flowing outlines of the arms—and the sweeping length of the limbs—with two delicate feet peeping from beneath the skirt of the dress—and then, too, one exquisitely modelled hand, fair and white, with its tapering fingers, drooping listlessly and scarcely retaining the snowy cambric kerchief—a glimpse of the other hand amidst the showering masses of her auburn hair,—all constituted a portraiture calculated to ravish the senses of any one who beheld this charming creature.

Still she sat motionless, with her eyes fixed upon vacancy: but her thoughts were evidently busy; and as that soft smile appeared upon her lips, the roseate tint upon her damask cheeks gradually deepened into a crimson blush. Love was the subject of her thoughts—but a love on which it was guilt to ponder; and she knew it. Nevertheless, love—even the guiltiest—has its pleasurable emotions; and vainly may the human heart endeavour to banish the feeling from its tabernacle. As well bid the light of the sun cease to shine in the temple to which it has penetrated—as well bid the moonbeams cease to glance kissingly on the rippling bosom of the ocean—as to bid love withdraw its soft lustre from the sanctuary of the heart into which it has succeeded in gaining



LORD OSMOND.

admission, or to shed its light upon that heart which flutters beneath its influence.

But though Ethel was thus absorbed in reflections on a guilty love, was she herself already guilty? No: the last barrier which separated her from crime, was not yet broken down: she hovered upon the brink of a precipice — but still she hovered: she might yet retreat ere she fell completely over. But would she withstand the temptation? On the one hand there was a husband whom she could not possibly love nor esteem, and whom she could scarcely prevent herself from absolutely detesting. So far as his caresses went, they were loathed as the pawings of an imp would be: his character was despised;—and thus feeble indeed was the difference between the sentiment which Ethel already entertained towards him, and downright abhorrence. On the other hand, there was a young man of her own age—an Adonis of beauty—of elegant appearance—of lofty intelligence—of fascinating manners—and of captivating address. This young man adored her—worshipped the very ground on which she trod—loved her as woman is seldom loved. This she knew—this she felt. Oh, great was the danger in which Ethel Lascelles stood!

She was in the midst of her reverie, when the door opened; and a footman, entering, said, "If you please, your ladyship, Lord Osmond has called to see the Earl, who is out."

The man's eye did not catch the deepening blush on the cheeks of his mistress at the mention of that young nobleman's name, because her countenance was not immediately turned towards him. With a mighty effort she regained her self-possession; and said in a quiet way, as if influenced by no extraordinary emotion, "Lord Osmond can wait, if he think fit, until the Earl's return."

"His lordship requests an interview with your ladyship," replied the footman. "His lordship bade me say that he has a particular message to be delivered to the Earl; and he hopes your ladyship will not refuse to take charge of it."

Ethel hesitated for a few moments; and then she said, in the same quiet tone as before, "You can show Lord Osmond up."

The footman bowed and retired; and in a few moments the Earl's son was announced.

"Good heavens, what imprudence, Adolphus!" said the Countess, in a tone of half-reproach and half-anxiety, but with ineffable tenderness over all: and her hand too was immediately clasped in Lord Osmond's as those words were spoken when the footman had again retired.

"Imprudence in coming to see you, dearest dearest Ethel!" said the young nobleman, in a voice full of masculine harmony. "Oh, how can you breathe a syllable that seems tinged with reproach?"—and as his fine large hazel eyes looked tenderly down into her's of blue, he kept her fair white hand clasped in his own.

"But your father, Adolphus——my husband," she added, with a deep mournful sigh. "Oh, my God! if he should suspect——And what must he think of your coming hither now?"

"Listen to me, Ethel," responded Lord Osmond, as he led his beautiful mother-in-law to a seat, and placed himself by her side—that mother-in-law who was only just his own age, "I knew that my father was out: I saw him just now alight from the carriage at his club; but he did not observe me. I am well aware that when once amidst those with whom he can gossip after his own fashion, he will not speedily return. I came to the house under the pretext of seeing him: I sent up a message beseeching an audience of you. The servants can suspect nothing; and when my father comes home, you can tell him that I have been here. You can say that I am wearied and distressed on account of the coldness which subsists between him and me—that I seek his forgiveness—that if he will grant it, I am prepared to make any apology for whatsoever offence, real or imaginary, he may have cônceived himself to have sustained at my hands——"

"And for what purpose, Adolphus, is all this?" inquired Ethel, with a half frightened look: for though she put the question, she already more than comprehended the young nobleman's purpose.

"Oh, can you ask me?" he exclaimed, in a reproachful tone. "Does not your heart tell you it is in order that we may be together—that I may have frequent opportunities of seeing her who is dearer to me than life itself! Ethel, I shall go mad if all this be not accomplished. Conceive what I have suffered for months and months past—catching only an occasional stolen interview—having to watch your movements in order to be blessed with a few minutes of discourse——And then too," he added, gently and hesitatingly, "you promised a certain thing, and you kept not the appointment. Yesterday I awaited you there—and you came not!"

A burning blush appeared upon the cheeks of the Countess; and her eyes, which swam in the deep languor of tenderness, were bent down as she murmured, "I thought better of it, Adolphus. My guardian angel inspired me with courage; and I resisted the temptation. For heaven's sake, never again propose such a thing!—never again seek to draw me away from that path of duty which I must and will pursue!"

The reader may now comprehend that the appointment which Clement Redcliffe had rightly conjectured to have been given when he beheld the tender pair in discourse on the terrace of Covent Garden Market, was not kept.

"Ethel," resumed the enamoured young nobleman, "my destiny—my life are in your hands. I know as well as you do, all the guilt which attaches itself to such a love as our's: but I can no more struggle against it than I could breast the furious tide of the mightiest river as it rolls into the sea. Can you understand me when I tell you that if the Enemy of Mankind proffered me happiness in your arms as the price of my soul, I would sign the compact——Oh, sign it cheerfully—joyously!"

"Good heavens, Adolphus, speak not in this dreadful manner!" murmured the Countess, with a shudder sweeping over her frame, and yet with an irrepressible tenderness in the soft melting eyes and on the passion-breathing lips.

"Dreadful?" ejaculated Adolphus: "is there anything dreadful in learning that you are the object of a love so devoted as mine? Oh, this love is all the world to me! Crown it with happiness—and the world becomes an elysium! Doom me to despair—and the world is a blank——no, a veritable hell," he added with frightful emphasis, "from which I will fly as a wretched suicide!"

"Oh, my God, my God! what words are these!" murmured Ethel: and involuntarily, so to speak—or rather under the influence of an irresistible impulse—she threw herself in his arms, weeping and sobbing upon his breast.

"Dearest, dearest Ethel," he murmured, in the harmonious tone of love which sank down into the very depths of her soul; "you know not—Oh, you know not how very dear you are to me!"—and he imprinted a thousand impassioned kisses upon her lips, her burning cheeks, and her throbbing brows.

"Good heavens, if *he* should enter suddenly!" ejaculated the Countess, disengaging herself from Lord Osmond's enraptured embrace. "No, no—we must separate—you must depart! Not for an instant must you dream of coming to take up your abode beneath this roof again! We should stand the risk of betraying ourselves a thousand times in the day. It would be fatal to my reputation——I cannot say to my happiness; for *that* is gone since I learnt to love you!"

"Oh, no!—in love there is happiness!" exclaimed Adolphus, in a fervid tone. "Love banishes all considerations: it holds everything cheap and light in comparison with the power and the immensity of its own sentiment. But listen to me, dearest Ethel, while I speak seriously and without excitement. Eighteen months have elapsed since you became the Countess of Lascelles. When you returned from the country after the honeymoon, you found me at this house. We had never seen each other before. I was in France when the marriage took place: I knew not even that it was contemplated until I received my father's letter to say that the ceremony was solemnized. He invited me not to it; and yet there was no coldness between us *then*."

"Wherefore recapitulate all these things," asked the Countess, "which are so well known to me?"

"Because they will lead me on in a consecutive manner to what I have to explain as my purpose," responded the young nobleman. "Bear with me, Ethel: grant me your attention—I beseech you. We met, then, as I have said, for the first time when you returned from the country where the honeymoon was spent; and in this very apartment was it we looked each other in the face for that first time. I had heard that you were beautiful: but, good heavens! I had expected not to find myself in the presence of an angel. As if a lightning flash had darted in unto my soul—as if an inspiration had penetrated my brain—did the conviction strike me that it was I who should have led you to the altar, and that we were made to suit each other, though heaven had ordained that you should become another's. I loved you at first sight: I could have fallen down and worshipped you as you stood there! No wonder, then, that for the few weeks which followed, my manner was abstracted—that I looked dull and unhappy—that I spoke petulantly to my father when he addressed me. And he, putting the worst construction on everything, thought me selfish and undutiful—fancying that my mind was occupied with ideas of filthy lucre, while it was absorbed in a devouring, maddening, frenzied passion. He taunted me with a sordid dislike to his marriage, on the ground that I feared lest some portion of his estates should pass away from me. No wonder that I was stricken dumb by the accusation—or that when I recovered the power of speech, my incoherent words, coupled with my still vacant and dismayed looks, should have seemed to justify his suspicions. But what could I tell him? Not the truth! I could not confess that I adored and worshipped his charming and beautiful wife!—you know that I could not! He ordered me from the house—this house in which he had not beheld my presence with pleasure from the first moment of his return with his bride. Since then, for more than a year, we have been estranged; and I have known not how to act. But have you forgotten the day, sweetest Ethel, when I met you by accident seven or eight months ago, and when under the influence of my impassioned love, I avowed all I felt?—have you forgotten how by your looks rather than by your words, you suffered me to understand that you had not seen me with indifference? And then too, on those few occasions that we have since met—in those hurried and stolen interviews which I have managed to obtain—you have confessed the love which you feel for me——"

"Again, I ask you, Adolphus," inquired Ethel, glancing anxiously towards the door, "why all these recapitulations?"

"Listen, my beloved one—and you shall learn what I mean. I have already told you," continued Lord Osmond, "that I cannot possibly exist in this manner. I must see you often—constantly. If it be only to gaze upon your countenance—to hear the sound of your voice—and to press your hand occasionally—these pleasures must I have. You will not deny them? This, then, is the plan I have formed:—I will humble myself to my father; I will acknowledge a selfishness and a worldly-mindedness of which I never was guilty; I will beseech his forgiveness. He cannot refuse it. With all his numerous faults, he is not a man possessing a heart that can be termed unredeemably bad. You will tell him presently that finding he was not at home, I ventured to seek an interview with you—that I besought you to deliver to his ears the assurance of my contrition——"

"O Adolphus, it is impossible!—we cannot live beneath the same roof!" interrupted the Countess, with the vehemence of one who felt that all her good resolutions were rapidly melting away, and who sought to regain them.

"Surely, surely, we can be upon our guard!" said Lord Osmond, with a look and tone of the most earnest entreaty: "surely, surely, we can so control our looks—so measure our words—so bear ourselves to each other, as to defy suspicion? In my father's presence, I will be all respectful attention towards you——"

"O Adolphus," murmured the Countess, "this love of our's will be fatal to me—it will be my destruction——I feel that it will! There is already a terrible presentiment of evil in my soul——"

"Banish it, Ethel—banish it, I beseech you!"—and the young nobleman grew more earnest and imploring in his pleadings. "Abandon not yourself to such groundless fears—such baseless misgivings. I tell you that we will be all circumspection in our conduct. But conceive the happiness, dearest Ethel, of living beneath the same roof—of breathing the same atmosphere——"

"No, Adolphus—it is impossible!" exclaimed the Countess, all her better feelings and all her fortitude suddenly reviving with greater power too than on any other occasion during this interview. "I have been standing on the brink of a precipice; and I will retreat in time. If you really love me—if you entertain the slightest spark of affection for me—impel me not over that brink —hurl me not down into the abyss beneath! No, no—it shall not be! Besides, Adolphus, it would be something shocking and revolting to think that you, the son, should live beneath the same roof with my husband, the father, and know that I am compelled to receive from him those caresses which you may not in honour bestow. My mind is made up! It will cost me many, many bitter pangs to renounce this love of your's: but it shall be done. And if I who am a woman, can prove thus resolute —you, as a man, must show yourself even stronger still in the performance of a duty. Leave me, Adolphus—I entreat—I conjure——nay, I command that you leave me!"

"Ethel—dearest Ethel—you are driving me to despair!"—and the young nobleman was frightfully distressed.

"And I too am in despair," rejoined the Countess: "but my resolve is taken. It would be cruel—worse than cruel—ungenerous and unmanly for you, Adolphus, to attempt to turn me from my purpose. Leave me, I say."

"And my father?" inquired Lord Osmond, in a deep voice full of concentrated emotion, while his looks did indeed bespeak the despair which his lips had proclaimed: "what will you say to him? how will you account for my presence here to-day?"

"I will tell him all that you have suggested," was Ethel's quick and firm response: "but frankly do I inform you, Adolphus, that I shall speak in such a manner as to show that while I earnestly wish him to become friendly with you again, it is not my desire that you should return to dwell in this house."

With these words, the Countess of Lascelles rose abruptly from the sofa; and not daring to trust herself another moment with Adolphus, she rushed from the room. A few minutes afterwards the young nobleman issued from the house, with a forced serenity ot aspect, but with blank despair in his heart.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE EVENING PARTY.

It was now the memorable Saturday evening on which Mrs. Macaulay was to give her party in honour of the reconciliation between herself and Mrs. Sifkin who lived over the way. The number of guests had been duly borne in mind with regard to the preparations for the entertainment: but at about six o'clock Mrs. Macaulay gave another look at the eatables and drinkables, for the purpose of satisfying herself that there would be sufficient on the one hand, as well as that there should be no undue extravagance on the other. Opening a cupboard in her own front-parlour, she contemplated a little array of five decanters—two containing port, purchased at the rate of one-and-threepence a bottle at the oilman's who dealt in British wines—the next two containing sherry, procured at the same place and at the same price —and the fifth decanter being two-thirds full of brandy, which Mrs. Macaulay had not purchased at all, but which were the remains of a bottle that Mr. Redcliffe had no farther use for.

"Let me see," said Mrs. Macaulay; "how many will there be of us altogether?"—and she proceeded to tell off the expected guests on her fingers for about the twentieth time during this particular day. "There is the two Wanklins—Miss Spilsbury —and Captain Bluff: that's four. Then there's me and Master Ashton: for I know from what he said his sister won't come: so that makes six. Then there's Mrs. Dumpling—Mrs. Sifkin—Mr. Chubb (the sanctimonious humbug!)—and Mr. Hogben: that makes ten. Then there's Mrs. Chowley and her two daughters—the conceited chits!—and that makes thirteen. Thirteen people—and four bottles of wine. Each bottle ten glasses: that's forty glasses, to be divided by thirteen. Well, it will give three a-piece, and just leave a drain at the bottom of each decanter for gentility's sake. Because *then* comes the brandy, the hot water, and sugar——and I am not quite clear but that there's rather too much wine."

Mrs. Macaulay stood gazing dubiously for a few minutes on the little array of decanters,—pondering whether she should suppress the production of one of port or one of sherry; and there was even a moment when she actually thought of keeping back one of each. But then she remembered that she had promised to do the thing handsomely and come out with a genteel little spread: so she decided upon keeping back nothing at all, and going the whole hog with her extravagance and profusion for once in a way. Having arrived at this decision, she hastened down stairs to inspect the larder; and having cast a look over its contents, she soliloquized after the following fashion:—

"Cold veal pie at the head of the table—large enough to bear at least thirteen helps. Then there's four dozen of oysters ordered for nine o'clock——But dear me! what if the best part of the company should take a fancy to oysters? *I* sha'n't touch any for one: but there are twelve who *might;* and how many would that give to each? Four dozen is forty-eight; and twelves into forty-eight go four. That would be only four oysters a-piece!"

At this awful calculation the worthy lady looked somewhat blank; and she was even deliberating whether she should not send forth to order an extra two dozen of oysters, when she again plunged her looks into the larder, and went on soliloquising.

"Fried sausages and mashed potatoes for the bottom of the table—and the oysters to go in the middle. The spread, after all, would be genteel and liberal enough. Susan!" she exclaimed, turning round to one of the maids, "did Mr. Redcliffe give orders for his dinner to-morrow, as he always does on Saturday night for the Sunday?"

"Yes, ma'am," was the response. "He said, as usual, that we were to get him what we liked, so as he wasn't troubled about it—only that he didn't want any more poultry for the present."

"Then that's capital!" cried Mrs. Macaulay, her countenance becoming radiant. "There's this fowl that he's only eaten a wing of for to-day's dinner, and which he won't think of having up again. I am sure I should be the last person in the world to make use of it if I wasn't certain that he would not want it. And as for leaving it here to get as dry as a stick by Monday morning, and then be told that he didn't wish to see it brought up to table again——it would be quite a sin! So I tell you what, Susan—cut it up—make the one wing look as much like two as possible, by dividing the pinion—and broil it all with mushroom sauce. There are some pickled mushrooms in a bottle somewhere. Yes—after all it will be a beautiful little supper; and I know Mrs. Dumpling will be ready to bite her own head off with envy and jealousy when she thinks of her own trumpery suppers of stale tarts and currant-wine."

Having arrived at all these very comfortable and satisfactory conclusions, Mrs. Macaulay gave out the tea, coffee, and sugar, as well as the silver tea-spoons, which she carefully counted; and with many injunctions against breaking any of the best china tea-service, she sailed forth from the kitchen. Ascending to her chamber, which was behind the parlour, she performed her toilet; and at five minutes before seven she lighted the mould-candles in the sitting-room just named. Then—in all the glory of a new black silk-gown, a cap with pink ribbons, her gold watch and chain, and a large fan which she had won in a sixpenny raffle twenty-five years previously—she took her seat to await the presence of the company. At five minutes past seven there was a double knock at the door; and the servant ushered in Mr. and Mrs. Wanklin—the former a short, sedate, sentimental-looking, pale-faced man in spectacles—the latter a tall, stately, consequential dame—and both of "a certain age." They dwelt in the neighbourhood—Mr. Wanklin keeping a circulating library on one side of a little shop, and Mrs. Wanklin a Berlin wool emporium by means of the window, shelves, and counter of the opposite side. This arrival was speedily followed by that of Miss Spilsbury—a tall, gaunt, maiden lady of fifty, with a hatchet face and a demure look—a brown false front, and a slate-coloured silk dress, very scanty in the skirt. She had an independence of seventy-five pounds a year, and was therefore much thought of by her friends and acquaintances. She was followed by Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk—a stout, bald-headed, pragmatic individual—sententious in his speech, and sepulchral in his tone. Then came Mrs. Chowley and the two Miss Chowleys—the mamma being a young widow of fifty-six or so, and "the girls" (as she called them) being respectively thirty-two and thirty. This delightful family kept a baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road; and as Mrs. Chowley's brother was butler in a Duke's family, and her great-grandfather had been coachman to some other Duke in the time of George II, the said delightful family was considered exceedingly aristocratic in all its connexions and associations.

Scarcely were the Chowleys seated, when there was a terrific knock and violent ring at the front door; and Captain Bluff was in a few moments announced. This was a guest of whom Mrs. Macaulay had reason to be proud, on account of the prefix of "Captain"—although the gallant officer himself did not wear any particular uniform, for the simple reason that none *is* worn by the commanders of the Gravesend steam-packets, to which service Captain Bluff was honourably attached. The Captain—who was a red-faced, weather-beaten man, dressed all in blue, with a blue-checked shirt—was warmly greeted by his hostess, and duly presented to the other guests, to whom he was previously unknown. At first the Miss Chowleys—who were very ugly and very affected, and embued with the most exquisite appreciation of everything which was aristocratic and genteel—thought it necessary to be amazingly disgusted, inasmuch as the Captain brought with him an unmistakable odour of rum and strong Cubas: but their looks and their manner changed all in a moment, when Mrs. Macaulay hastily whispered to them aside, that her very particular friend Captain Bluff had a few pounds in the Funds and was a single man; so that the young ladies most amiably made room for this jolly young bachelor of eight-and-forty to sit between them on one side of the fire-place.

The Captain's arrival was promptly followed by that of Mrs. Dumpling, who was a stout, red-faced, important dame—very fond of mixing herself up in her neighbours' concerns—very much given to gossiping and scandal—and equally so to strong waters, under whatsoever denominations—whether gin, rum, brandy, or shrub. On entering the apartment, she cast her looks around; and then fixing her gaze significantly upon Mrs. Macaulay, said, "So *she* has not come yet?"

"Why, I dare say," was the answer of the worthy hostess, "that Mrs. Sifkin wants you all to be assembled first, and gives you time for the purpose; so that her own appearance may have a becoming effect. And it's very right and proper on her part too: because, you know," added Mrs. Macaulay, looking around, "that Mrs. Sifkin is in duty bound to offer me her hand *first* when she enters the room."

Hereupon a discussion arose,—Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, gravely and sententiously expressing his opinion that as Mrs. Macaulay was the hostess, and as she had already received an apology from Mrs. Sifkin, conveyed through Mrs. Dumpling, it was only consistent with good breeding that Mrs. Macaulay should be foremost in welcoming her late enemy. Mr. Wanklin was of the same sentiment, which he confirmed by a quotation from a novel in his own circulating library: Mrs. Chowley followed on the same side, observing that from her connexions she had peculiar opportunities of laying down the law of etiquette on such a delicate point. This remark enabled the elder Miss Chowley—who had already set her cap at the Captain—to seize the occasion of whispering in his ear that her uncle was butler in a Duke's household, and that her great-great-grandfather had been coachman to some other Duke: whereat Captain Bluff expressed his admiration by a knowing wink, and looked towards the cupboard as if he were longing to make himself acquainted with its contents. However, it was finally settled that Mrs. Macaulay should present her hand to Mrs. Sifkin whensoever that lady might make her appearance; and though Mrs. Macaulay outwardly yielded with an excellent grace, she inwardly vowed eternal animosity thenceforth to all present who had conspired to force her into such a degradation.

"I don't think we are all here yet?" said Mrs. Dumpling, in a bland whisper to Mrs. Macaulay; "for I recollect you told me——"

"No, we are not all here yet," interrupted the lady thus appealed to, as she drew herself up in a dignified manner. "There's Mr. Hogben to come—the gentleman, you know, who was for twenty years in the service of the late King and that of her present Majesty, but who suddenly had a fortune left him."

Here it may be as well to inform the reader that Mr. Hogben, whose official services under the Crown were so magnificently paraded, had for twenty years filled the honourable though onerous, bustling, and not very lucrative situation of twopenny postman—but by a sudden windfall inheriting a few thousand pounds, he had set up as a gentleman and was now living on his means.

Scarcely had Mrs. Macaulay ceased speaking, when an unmistakable postman's knock caused the whole company to start, with the exception of Captain Bluff—who was never known to start at anything—not even when his steamer upset a wherry and drowned three people while working its way through the crowded masses of the Pool.

"That's Mr. Hogben!" cried Mrs. Macaulay. "Dear me! that a gentleman in his situation should give such a knock! But it's all the force of habit—and quite natural enough, Lord bless us!"

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, in his deep sepulchral voice; and the utterance of the word was another illustration of that force of habit which Mrs. Macaulay had just been commenting upon.

Mr. Hogben made his appearance—and a very remarkable one it was too. He was a thin, wiry individual—dressed out in a style which even the Miss Chowleys whisperingly declared to be the very pink of fashion; and he glided into the room with a quick, shambling gait, just as postmen are seen to adopt as they shuffle rapidly along the streets, pursuing their professional avocations from one house door to another.

"And still we are not complete," said Mrs. Dumpling to Mrs. Macaulay, when Mr. Hogben, having taken a seat next to Mrs. Chowley, began to pay very marked attention to this dashing young widow of fifty-six.

"No—not yet," responded the hostess to Mrs. Dumpling's remark: then raising her voice for the behoof of all the company, she added, "I am certain of having the pleasure of introducing to you a young gentleman—ahem!—secretary to his Grace the Duke of Marchmont—and of course the Duke's very particular and intimate friend. Only conceive the pleasure and happiness of living constantly with a Duke!"

"As my uncle does now," said the elder Miss Chowley, thus alluding to the relative who served as a ducal butler.

"And as our ancestor did before him," added the younger Miss Chowley—thus, with a proud family satisfaction, referring to her great-great-grandfather who was a ducal coachman.

"Well, I never seed a Dook to my knowledge in all my life," said Captain Bluff, who spoke in a very hoarse voice,—"except it was at the figger-head of a ship—and that was a wooden Dook——old Vellington."

The conversation was interrupted by the maid's announcement of "Mr. Ashton;" and Christian made his appearance.

"And where, my very dear young friend," cried Mrs. Macaulay, when the usual compliments were exchanged, "is that charming sister of your's. What! she couldn't come? Oh, dear me! I am so disappointed! But I suppose—ahem!—Lady Octavian Meredith couldn't spare her? Mr. Ashton's sister," added the worthy woman, looking round upon her guests, "is the bosom-friend—ahem!—of Lady Octavian Meredith; and I am sure you are all as much disappointed as I am that she cannot come."

Of course there was a universal expression of feeling in accordance with Mrs. Macaulay's remark; and Christian, as a Duke's secretary, and having a sister who was bosom friend to a titled lady, at once became the lion of the party.

Another knock and ring now produced a greater sensation than any previous summons at the front-door: for every one present felt assured that *this* must be Mrs. Sifkin. And Mrs. Sifkin it was who made her appearance in the shape of a little vinegar-looking, sharp-eyed, angular-featured woman, with carrotty hair. She was very plainly dressed, and seemed every inch of her the griping, greedy, cheese-paring lodging-house-keeper. Her thin lips were tightly compressed; and she had evidently made up her mind to treat Mrs. Macaulay with just as much civility or reserve, as the case might be, which she should experience at that lady's hands. There was a solemn silence as the two rivals stood in the presence of each other: but when Mrs. Macaulay extended her hand and bade Mrs. Sifkin consider herself to be quite at home, the guests signified their applause by what would be termed "a sensation" on the part of a public meeting. Then the vinegar aspect of Mrs. Sifkin relaxed; and she smiled in as honied a manner as such a countenance could possibly smile. Nothing *then* could exceed the love and friendship, the esteem and affection, which all in a moment sprang up between the late rivals and enemies. Mrs. Macaulay thought it becoming to get up a little cry,—sobbingly vowing that she had always regarded Mrs. Sifkin with a sisterly love although they were at daggers drawn: to which Mrs. Sifkin replied that as a true Christian she had never failed to remember Mrs. Macaulay in her prayers. This assertion elicited a deep sepulchral "Amen!" from the parish clerk—a quotation from a Minerva-press novel on the part of Mr. Wanklin, the circulating-library-keeper—and a subdued expression which sounded very much like "Humbug!" from the throat of Captain Bluff.

Things however were now upon a most amiable footing. Mrs. Macaulay rang for tea and coffee, and sat herself down at the table to preside over the festive scene. Plates of thin bread-and-butter, toast, and seed-cake (this being cut up in *thirteen* very small slices) were placed upon the board:

the cups "which cheered without inebriating" were passed round, to the satisfaction of all present save that of Captain Bluff, who, though he tossed off a cup of coffee at one draught, had all his thoughts settled upon rum. When the tea-things were cleared away, there was a round game,—from which however Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, requested to be omitted, on the ground that it was inconsistent with the solemnity and piety of his clerical calling; and he remembered also that he had a few baptismal certificates to fill up at home. So, having been careful to ascertain at what hour supper would be on table, he begged to be excused in the meanwhile.

The round game progressed very well without him, and was only once disturbed by an insinuation on the part of Mrs. Sifkin that Mrs. Dumpling had purloined some of her fish: but the former lady suffered herself to be appeased by the circumstance of Captain Bluff considerately given her a handful of his own—an act of kindness which was performed just in time to save Mrs. Dumpling from the disagreeable ordeal of having her eyes scratched out by her vixenish accuser. Christian might have made a similar accusation, and with considerable truth too, if he had chosen, against Miss Spilsbury: for if this highly respectable maiden lady, who lived upon an independence and was considered "quite genteel," kept very quiet in respect to her tongue, she was very busy with her fingers; and every time she thought Christian was not looking, she pilfered his fish,—endeavouring to conceal the theft under a short cough and a fumbling for her pocket-handkerchief. Christian however suffered himself to be robbed with a most exemplary patience—a circumstance which raised him so high in Miss Spilsbury's estimation, that when the round game was over, she whispered to Mrs. Macaulay, loud enough for him to overhear, that he was the nicest young man she had ever met in all her life.

The round game being finished, the maid entered to lay the cloth for supper; and Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, now re-appeared,—smelling very strong of tobacco-smoke, looking very red in the face, and having a certain watery vacant stare about the eyes. This however would not have occasioned any wonder on the part of the company, if they had known that instead of retiring into the bosom of his own family to write out basptismal certificates, he had been all the time in the hot parlour of the public-house round the corner, smoking his pipe and moistening his lips with three successive pints of strong old Kennet ale—a proceeding which the ecclesiastical gentleman doubtless regarded as far more innocent and likewise as more orthodox than joining in a round game of "commerce."

While the servant was laying the cloth, Mrs. Macaulay affected to be conversing in a perfectly calm and untroubled manner, though in reality she was watching askance every movement and arrangement of her domestic, for fear lest she should do something wrong; and she could not help interspersing her conversation with frequent hints and orders to the girl.

"Well, as I was saying," Mrs. Macaulay observed, "it would be impossible to have a nicer or better lodger than Mr. Redcliffe. He never troubles himself about——the pepper-box on that side, Jane——what he is going to have for dinner, as long as his meals are served up regular. He is very quiet——the mustard in this corner, Jane——talks very little to anybody——look! the cloth is all tumbled——but is out a great deal. I am sure for the life of me I don't know what he can always be doing with himself——do take care, Jane!——and the other night he stayed out so very late I was quite frightened——the pie at *this* end, Jane!"

"Genelmen will stay out late sometimes," observed Captain Bluff; and he winked knowingly at the first male countenance which met his eye at the moment, and which happened to be that of Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, who instantaneously put on an air of indignation, which, inasmuch as it was a tipsy one, only had the effect of making Captain Bluff burst out into a shout of uproarious laughter.

"Did you mean that look and that laugh for me, sir?" inquired Mr. Chubb, in the deepest of his sepulchral tones, and endeavouring to appear very awfully solemn indeed.

"Well, I did—and that's the truth on't!" returned Captain Bluff: "so you can put it in your pipe and smoke it; and if so be it's a sort of bakker you ain't used to, you must make the best of the bargin."

Here Mr. Chubb rose from his seat, and was either about to appeal to the company or else to make a personal assault upon Captain Bluff,—when the elder Miss Chowley threw herself between them, and availed herself of the opportunity to get up a most interesting little tragedy of affright, entreaty, and hysterical symptoms,—not forgetting to implore the Captain to master his temper and spare *her* feelings.

"Oh! let him get the steam up," vociferated Bluff: "he's precious cranky and will soon bust his biler."

Mr. Chubb looked round with awe-inspiring dismay. The idea that a parish clerk should be thus insulted—thus outraged! What would the world come to next? This dreadful question did Mr. Chubb's countenance appear to ask, in default of the power of his tongue to say anything at all.

"Come, old feller," said Bluff, who was really a very good-natured man, "I didn't mean to offend you. If that there twenty-horse power steam-ingin which is working in your bussum goes too fast, ease her and stop her; but don't go for to keep down the safety-walve with the sartainty of busting outright in a minute or two. Here, tip us your paddle, and let's sit down to mess as good friends."

"Amen!" groaned Mr. Chubb, as he extended the hand which, figuratively described as a paddle, the gallant Captain had so bluntly solicited.

Supper was now served up. The veal-pie stood at the head of the table—the dish of oysters in the middle—the sausages and mashed potatoes at the bottom. The broiled fowl, with the mushroom sauce, looked very handsome as a side-dish—and in order to correspond therewith, the thoughtful servant had placed on the opposite side an apple-tart, which had been made for Mr. Redcliffe's dinner on the morrow, but which the said thoughtful Jane had taken it into her head might just as well figure on her mistress's supper table for this particular occasion. She then glanced half smilingly and half apprehensively at Mrs. Macaulay, to assure herself that this little prudential arrangement met the worthy lady's approbation; and the quick but scarcely perceptible nod which her mistress gave, placed her perfectly at her ease.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, pray be seated," said Mrs. Macaulay. "You see I treat you without ceremony: it is merely a humble repast—but such as it is, you are quite welcome:"—and as she thus spoke, she glanced askance at Mrs. Dumpling to see how that lady regarded the display.

But so far from Mrs. Dumpling being ready through envy or jealousy to bite her own head off—as Mrs. Macaulay had ere now anticipated—the sort of readiness she did exhibit, was a strong yearning to commence an attack on the sausages and mashed potatoes. The company seated themselves; and to Mrs. Macaulay's infinite relief, the oysters, so far from being in general request, were only rendered available for the appetites of a few—so that she had no fear of an insufficiency of that particular portion of the repast.

"What for you, Mr. Chubb?" inquired Mrs. Macaulay, when she had seen that the ladies were becomingly cared for. "Shall it be pie? I can recommend it."

"Amen," responded the parish clerk, who had just emptied his tumbler of ale and had beckoned the girl to refill it.

"And you, Captain Bluff?" said Mrs. Macaulay, with her most amiable smile.

"Sassengers and meshed taturs for me, ma'am," was the Captain's response. "Always begin with the hot things and wind up with cold uns. Leave the coldest till last—cos why they lays easier on t'other foundation. So I'll have sassengers fust: then I'll pitch into the briled fowl: arterwards I'll taste the meat-pie; and I'll wind up with a dozen or so of them hoysters—with maybe a bit of the thingumbob on t'other side of the table:" thus alluding to the fruit-tart.

There was now a pause, of which Mrs. Macaulay took advantage to say in an impressive manner, "Jane, you have forgotten to put the port and sherry on the table."

Here the worthy hostess again looked furtively at Mrs. Dumpling: but this excellent lady was so busy with the food upon her plate, that she had really no time nor thought for that envy and jealousy which Mrs. Macaulay had been anxious to provoke; and therefore the absence of those feelings on Mrs. Dumpling's part rather chagrined and annoyed Mrs. Macaulay than otherwise.

The wine was produced: and Mrs. Macaulay begged the ladies and gentlemen to take care of themselves.

"I don't know whether you like port that is fruity, Mr. Chubb," she said; "but my wine-merchant assured me that this was of the very best quality; and I don't mind whispering in your ear that it is the same which he supplies to the Duke of Wellington's table."

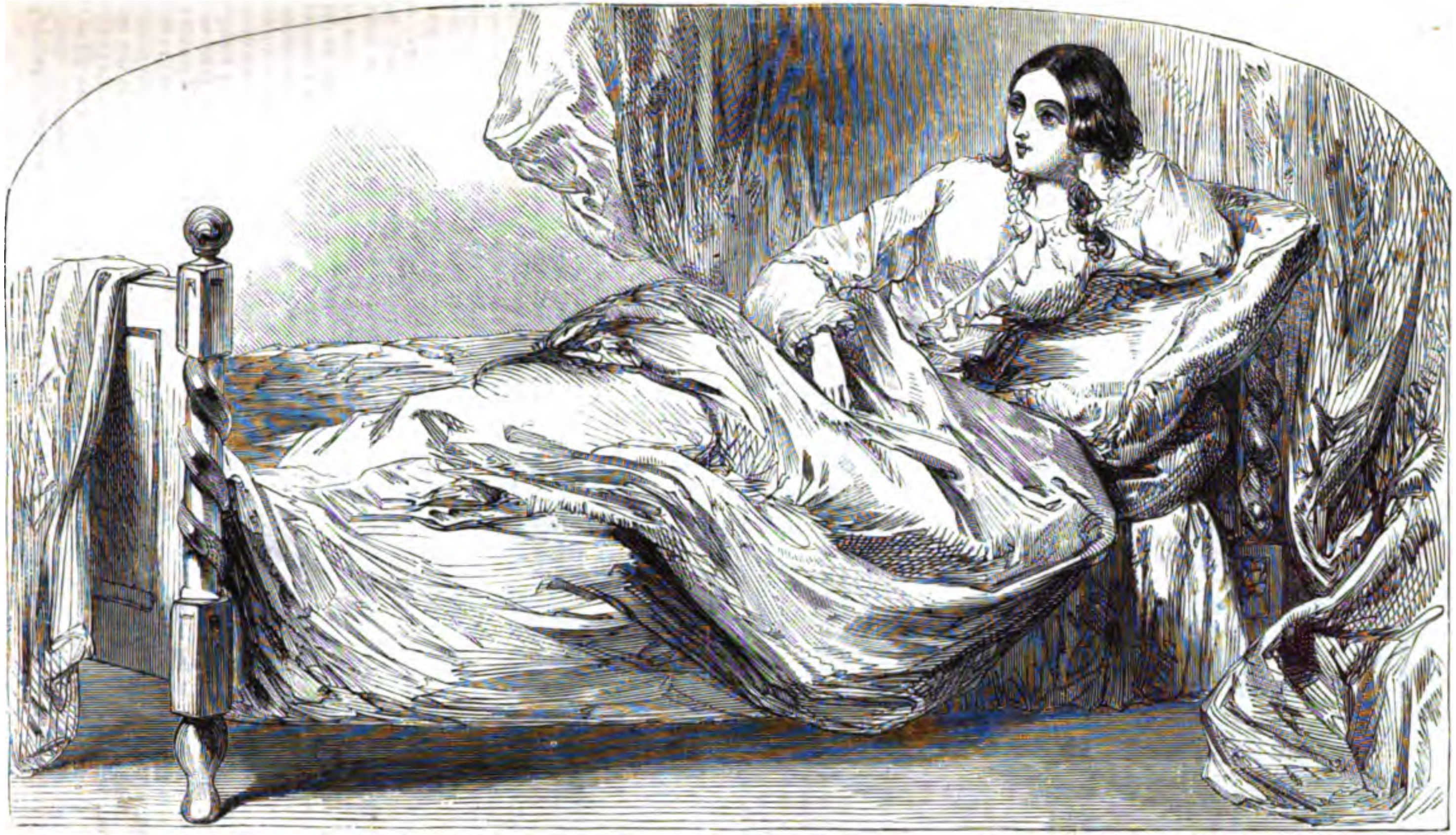
This whispered assurance was however loud enough to be caught by the ear of every one present; and Mrs. Dumpling, who was at the moment handing her plate for a third supply of sausages and mashed potatoes, had leisure to bridle up and exchange a malicious look with Mrs. Sifkin—as much as to imply that this was a mere romance of their dearly beloved and excellent hostess about her wine. Mrs. Macaulay, who saw what was passing, nevertheless affected to be perfectly innocent on the subject; though she inwardly vowed to cut Mrs. Dumpling from the very moment after their shaking hands when the hour for departure should come—and she was equally resolute to pick another quarrel with Mrs. Sifkin on the following day.

"Try the sherry, Mr. Ashton," she said, still maintaining all the winning urbanity proper to the hospitable founder of a feast. "By the bye——how very extraordinary! this is some of the identical wine which is supplied to your friend the Duke of Marchmont. You surely *must* recognise it? You *must* have tasted the very same quality at his Grace's table?"

Now, in making this earnest appeal to our youthful hero, Mrs. Macaulay had two distinct objects to gain. One was to elicit such an answer as would confirm the impression she wished to convey about the excellence of her wine; and the other was to stand on a pedestal in the estimation of her guests at thus being on such intimate terms with the friend and companion of a Duke. But Christian was both too honest and too inexperienced in the ways of the world, to be coaxed and wheedled into a falsehood for the behoof of Mrs. Macaulay's pride and vanity: so he answered with great ingenuousness and *naiveté*, "Really I am no judge of wine—though this seems sweeter than any sherry I have ever tasted before; and as for the Duke's table, of course I don't dine at it—I take my meals with the steward."

Mrs. Dumpling and Mrs. Sifkin exchanged rapid but malicious glances; and the Miss Chowleys tossed their heads, as much as to infer that Christian was nothing so very great after all, and that they were not quite sure he was anything better than their uncle who was a Duke's butler, or their ancestor who had been a Duke's coachman. Mrs. Macaulay, for the moment thrown into confusion by young Ashton's unsophisticated response, appeared to be suddenly seized with an inclination to dive deep into the mysteries of the pie before her; and fortunately Captain Bluff came out with something comical in the course of a minute, so that the conversation was turned and Mrs. Macaulay recovered her good spirits.

The comestibles were disposed of—and literally so, for every dish was emptied, Mrs. Dumpling eating enough for any six moderate feeders, and Captain Bluff partaking of everything, finishing the oysters, and winding up with a plate of apple-tart. The brandy was now placed upon the board; the conversation grew more animated: Captain Bluff became more and more uproarious, and flung amatory glances upon the elder Miss Chowley. The consequence was that this young lady, who for the last sixteen years—indeed ever since she *was* sixteen—had been looking out for a husband, felt assured she was in a fair way to obtain one at last; and when the Captain, under the influence of the bad wine, frequent tumblers of ale, and his second glass of brandy-and-water, trod accidentally with his heavy boot upon her toe—at the same time (but *this* was purposely done) whispering some joke about the baby-linen warehouse—Miss Chowley felt that her conquest was



complete. She whispered a few words to her mamma, who in order to listen to her eldest "girl," was compelled for the moment to leave off listening to the tender whispers of Mr. Hogben, the enriched twopenny postman; and the result of the whispering between the mamma and the daughter was that the latter conveyed to the Captain an invitation (also in a whisper) to tea on the following evening.

"Blow me tight!" vociferated Bluff, "if I wouldn't come and tackle your mess-table with the greatest pleasure: but to-morrow there's a excursion down to Margate with my boat—and I must be on the paddle-box from nine in the morning till nine at night."

Miss Chowley blushed red as a peony at the stentorian manner in which her whispered invitation to tea was thus proclaimed to the whole company; and Miss Spilsbury—the tall, gaunt maiden lady—drew up her form with a prudishness which made it look still taller and more gaunt than it was before.

But this little incident was quickly succeeded by another which attracted general notice. Mrs. Dumpling, who had a keen eye to the spirits, saw that the brandy was so rapidly disappearing she must make haste and finish her first tumbler in order to have a chance of obtaining a second; and in doing this, some of the hot steaming fluid went what is called "the wrong way." So poor Mrs. Dumpling became almost convulsed with a violent fit of coughing, and looked as if she were going off in an apoplectic fit.

"Tap her on the back!" cried Mrs. Sifkin.

"Cut her stay-lace!" exclaimed Mrs. Wanklin.

"Throw water into her face!" said Mrs. Macaulay, with an air of deepest concern, and inwardly hoping that some one would at once follow out the suggestion by dashing a tumber full of the cold fluid in the choking lady's countenance.

"Ease her!" cried Captain Bluff, in a voice as loud and hoarse as if he were roaring from the top of the paddle-box to the boy stationed at the hatchway of the engine-room. "Stop her! Don't let her go-ahead like that 'ere! By jingo, she's gone down stern foremost!" he vociferatingly added, as the unfortunate Mrs. Dumpling tumbled off her chair.

Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk, instantaneously endeavoured to raise the worthy dame: but he tumbled down likewise—for truth compels us to declare that this very orthodox gentleman was now excessively drunk.

"That's all the effect of your good wine, ma'am," roared Captain Bluff, with a shout of laughter. "Their bilers is busted—their ingins is all stopped—they're reglarly brandy-logged——I knowed how it would be! They must ile their wheels well for theirselves afore they'll go agin."

At first Mrs. Macaulay was inclined to be very indignant and to seem very much disgusted at this exhibition on the part of Mrs. Dumpling and the parish clerk: but the compliment conveyed by Captain Bluff in respect to her wine, not merely appeased her in a moment, but made her look upon the scene with a complaisant and satisfied air. Mrs. Dumpling was speedily raised up in the brawny arms of Captain Bluff; while Christian performed the same kind office for Mr. Chubb.

"I'm afeard you're werry drunk, sir," said the Captain, now finding leisure to address this observation with John Bull bluntness and seamanlike frankness to the discomfited parish clerk,—"werry drunk indeed, sir! and I likes for to see it. Shows you've been enjoying yourself!"

"Amen!" gutturally hiccoughed Mr. Chubb.

"Do, my dear young friend," said Mrs. Macaulay to Christian, "see the poor man home. He lives in Duke Street—next door, you know, to the baker's where you used to deal when you lived here."

"I will see him home with much pleasure," replied young Ashton. "But do you think he can stand?"

"Stand?" echoed Chubb: and the next moment he began rapping out such a series of profane oaths that the Miss Chowleys shrieked in dismay—and Mrs. Chowley was so much overcome that she fell into the arms of Mr. Hogben, who kindly offered to deliver her at her own door, though perhaps it would prove the weightiest letter he had ever in all his experience had so to deliver. As for Miss Spilsbury, she pursed up her mouth with supreme disgust; while Mrs. Sifkin whispered to Mrs. Wanklin that if people would cheat their guests with wine at one-and-threepence, making them believe it cost five shillings a bottle, it was no wonder such consequences should ensue.

In the midst of the confusion Christian managed to get the parish clerk out of the room, and anon out of the house: but scarcely had he been thus conducted into the fresh air, when Mr. Chubb seemed doggedly determined to sit down upon the front-door steps; and with sundry imprecations invoked against his own eyes and limbs, he persisted in pulling off his coat and high-lows, with the idea that he was in his own chamber and about to get into bed. Christian experienced the greatest trouble in lifting him up again; and as he led the parish clerk along, this inebriate gentleman shouted forth a strange medley, consisting of portions of the hundredth psalm and of a bacchanalian song; so that it was fortunate indeed they encountered no policemen, or Mr. Chubb might have passed the remainder of the night in the station-house.

Ultimately our young hero succeeded in getting the parish clerk to his own door,—which they thus reached as some adjacent church-clock was proclaiming the hour of midnight. It was a private house: for Mr. Chubb was a schoolmaster—and his school-room was at the back part of the premises, with an entrance from another street. A light was burning in the front-parlour; and the moment Christian knocked at the door, that light disappeared, so that he knew his summons was to be at once attended to. He heard a chain let fall within; and the door was opened. But Christian was seized with amazement at the first glance which he threw upon the being who thus opened that door. She was a young creature of not more than sixteen, and of the most ravishing beauty. That same glance showed him too that there was an air of superiority about her—a natural gentility which forbade the thought that she could be the daughter of the parish clerk. Yet she was plainly though neatly dressed; and thus so far as her apparel went, she might have belonged to the Chubb family. But Christian felt convinced she did not. There was as much difference between the clumsy vulgarity of Mr. Chubb and the exquisite gentility of this charming creature, as there is between the uncouth cart-horse and the thorough-bred.

The parish clerk was leaning against the railings in front of the house, his hat cocked over his left ear—his white cravat loosened and in disorder—and his lips giving forth incoherent mutterings, in which the words "vestry"—"hundredth psalm"—"praise and glory," blended with an oath or two, were alone intelligible.

"I am sorry," said Christian, lifting his hat to the young creature whose beauty so ravished him, "that you should be compelled to gaze on such a spectacle as this."

The young girl advanced upon the threshold—held forward the light which she carried in her hand—and now saw more plainly than she did at first, in what condition Mr. Chubb had been brought home. Her countenance, hitherto remarkable for its softness, and characterized by the sweetest amiability of look, rapidly assumed an expression of mingled astonishment, indignation, and disgust: but suddenly bethinking herself that some answer was due to Christian's courteous remark, she said with a well-bred affability, blended with the sweetest virginal modesty, "And I on my part, sir, am sorry that you should have had so unpleasant a task to perform."

"What's the matter?" cried a shrill vixenish female voice from the top of the staircase: "what's the matter, I say, Miss Vincent?"

"Ah," thought Christian to himself, "she is not, then, the daughter of these people!"—and he felt an indescribable and at the moment unaccountable satisfaction at receiving this confirmation of his previous idea upon the subject.

"It is Mr. Chubb," answered the young lady—for such indeed did she appear to be: and she spoke with an amiable sweetness, mingled however with a visible timidity and trepidation.

"Then why doesn't Mr. Chubb come in?" demanded the same shrill voice which had already spoken from the head of the staircase. "And who are you a-talking to there, Miss Vincent?"

"A young gentleman has been kind enough," she answered, "to see Mr. Chubb home."

"Oh, I understand all about it!" cried the shrill voice: "he's drunk—the beast!"

At this coarse, though really not altogether uncalled for remark, the countenance of the beautiful Miss Vincent flushed again, as if the natural delicacy of her soul were shocked at the woman's grossness; and the quick furtive look which she threw at Christian, showed him how pained she felt at being thus seen in any sort of connexion with such low-bred persons. The youth, however, glanced towards her with a mingled admiration and sympathy, which proved that he felt for her—and that so far from thinking the worse of her for being in that house, he commiserated her on account of the circumstances, whatsoever they might be, which had thus thrown her in the companionship of the Chubb family.

Mrs. Chubb now made her appearance, in the form of a tall, gawky, lean woman, with a very sour aspect, and indeed a forbidding look. She was only half dressed, and was in her night-cap,—having evidently emerged from her couch.

"I am sure if I had expected this," she exclaimed, "when I went to bed, ill as I was, and asked you, Miss Vincent, to have the kindness to sit up for him——But see how the drunken brute is leaning against them railings! Isn't he a pretty feller to stand up to-morrow and ask others to jine in with him in singing to the praise and glory of God? Why, he'll have his eyes so bleared, and red, and blinking, that he'll look like an owl in an ivy bush. Come along, do!"—and she wound up her tirade by clutching her husband by the arm and shaking him violently.

Mr. Chubb, who evidently stood in mortal awe of his wife, was a trifle sobered by her presence and by the shaking process: so that he was enabled to stagger into the house.

"Thank'ee, young gentleman, for your attention," said Mrs. Chubb to our hero.

"Good night, sir," said Miss Vincent, in the sweet music of her soft voice.

"Good night," answered Christian: and as the door closed behind him, he walked slowly away,—his imagination full of the beautiful creature whom he had thus seen at the parish clerk's house.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BOX.

Precisely at nine o'clock on the ensuing Tuesday evening, Christian Ashton arrived in a cab at Madame Angelique's establishment. He alighted; and entering the shop, which was not as yet closed, gave his name to Madame Angelique's French deputy, who was behind the counter. The woman seemed at once to understand what she had to do; and in her broken English, she informed Christian that if he would return to the cab, the box he had been sent for should be immediately brought out to him. In a few minutes this woman herself appeared, carrying the box,—which was a large deal one, carefully corded; and the key was sealed up in a little parcel, which was likewise consigned to Christian's care.

The cab drove away; and as the driver had previously received his instructions from our hero, he proceeded straight to Mortimer Street. Mr. Redcliffe was at home, expecting Christian; and the youth himself carried the box up-stairs to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting-apartment. He received a cordial welcome from that gentleman, who also inquired most kindly after his sister.

"I saw her this morning, sir," replied Christian; "and she was quite well. She is however naturally grieved at the circumstance of my leaving town; because we shall be separated for a whole month. And now, Mr. Redcliffe, I have brought the box according to your instructions: and here is a little packet containing the key."

Redcliffe took the packet—examined the seal—and found that it was a common one, impressed by a stone that had no device nor initials upon it. He unhesitatingly broke open the packet—took forth the key—and bade Christian uncord the box. This was speedily done; and Mr. Redcliffe then said, "I have before observed to you, Christian, that we are engaged in an enterprise which will not permit us to be over scrupulous or fastidious in the course we pursue. It is better that we should be guilty of a slight violation of the sanctity of seals and locks, than tamely and quietly suffer an amiable and virtuous lady to become the victim of the most nefarious conspiracy."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Redcliffe unlocked the box; and when he raised the lid, the contents were found to consist of beautiful female dresses.

"After all," said Christian, "this box seems to furnish no such clue, sir, as you doubtless expected to discover."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when one of the servants of the house made her appearance; and Mr. Redcliffe at once closed the lid of the box, before she had an opportunity of catching a glimpse of its contents.

"If you please, sir," she said, "a young lady is inquiring for you. She gives the name of Miss Eveleen O'Brien."

"Let her be shown up," responded Mr. Redcliffe, in that curt manner with which he was frequently accustomed to issue his orders: then, the moment the door was closed behind the servant, he said to Christian, "The arrival of this young person is most opportune. I did not expect her until to-morrow: but she doubtless brings us some important intelligence."

The door again opened; and Eveleen made her appearance. She stopped short on finding that Mr. Redcliffe was not alone: but he hastened to take her hand, saying in a hurried whisper, "Fear not!—this youth is in my confidence. You have fulfilled your promise—you have left that den of infamy—and henceforth you shall find a friend in me."

Eveleen murmured her gratitude; and Mr. Redcliffe, making her sit down, said to her, "Now, Miss O'Brien, have the goodness to communicate whatsoever you may have to impart."

"I have succeeded in discovering, sir," responded the young Irish girl, "that for the last six days the establishment has been busy in making up certain elegant dresses which are exact counterparts of others previously made for the Duchess of Marchmont. As much secrecy has been observed as Madame Angelique could possibly maintain in the matter: but as you may suppose, the affair has created no little surprise amongst the girls engaged in the work. It is very certain that the Duchess of Marchmont herself did not order these counterparts; because instructions have been issued to abstain from the slightest allusion thereto in her Grace's presence the next time her Grace visits the establishment."

"And do you happen to have seen these dresses?" inquired Mr. Redcliffe.

"Oh, yes!" responded Eveleen: "for inasmuch as the hands were so busy, I volunteered to render Madame Angelique a little assistance; and it was by these means that I got amongst the workwomen and discovered what I have told you."

"There is the box, Miss O'Brien," said Mr. Redcliffe: "have the kindness to examine its contents."

Eveleen did as she was desired; and at once pronounced the dresses to be precisely the same as those which she had seen making up as the duplicates of the costumes originally fashioned to the order of the Duchess of Marchmont.

Christian was bewildered by all that he thus heard; but Mr. Redcliffe threw upon him a significant look, as much as to imply that *he* was not altogether so much at a loss to fathom the mystery:—then again turning to Miss O'Brien, he said, "One of your companions—Lettice Rodney, I think her name is—has either left you, or is going to leave?"

"She has already left, sir," answered Eveleen: "she went away the first thing this morning. She did not say whither she was going—nor how long she should be absent."

"I know whither she is going," responded Mr. Redcliffe. "Now, Christian, you must take your departure; but before you go I have a few words to say to you:"—then drawing the youth aside, he whisperingly went on to observe, "To-morrow morning you leave for Oaklands. I also shall repair into that neighbourhood in the course of to-morrow. At a distance of about two miles thence, on the Winchester road, there is a turnpike. If you can possibly manage to meet me there on Saturday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I shall be glad to see you. But if not, then for each successive day, at the same hour, shall I be sauntering on the spot—until you make your appearance. Take care and use all possible circumspection: watch well the proceedings of the Duke—but beware how you excite suspicion."

Having given these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe directed Christian to cord up the box again; while he himself re-sealed the packet containing the key,—impressing it with a blank stamp which he had in his possession. Our young hero then took his departure, bearing the box with him to Marchmont House in Belgrave Square.

When he was gone, Mr. Redcliffe bade Eveleen excuse him for a few minutes; and he descended to Mrs. Macaulay's parlour. It was now about half-past nine o'clock; and the worthy woman was quietly and comfortably supping off the remainder of a pigeon-pie which had been served up at Mr. Redcliffe's dinner-table. She was therefore for a moment discomfited when that gentleman, having knocked at her door, immediately entered before she had even time to say, "Come in."

But Mrs. Macaulay was by no means the woman to be long thrown off her guard: and rising from her seat, she put on her very best smiles—cast a glance at the mirror to assure herself that her cap with pink ribbons sat properly on her head—and exclaimed, "Well, Mr. Redcliffe, this *is* an honour! It's the first time that you have entered my parlour since the day you took my lodgings. But pray sit down, sir. You see I am just picking a little bit. The fact is, my dear sir, I had *two* pigeon-pies made—one for you, and one for myself——"

"And I wish you a very excellent appetite, my dear madam," said Mr. Redcliffe, as he took a chair.

Here were both joy and surprise for Mrs. Macaulay! He either believed her tale of the duplicate pies, or else, with the kindest consideration, he affected to believe it: and whichever were the case, it was all the same to the worthy woman. And then, too, he had addressed her so familiarly! "My dear madam!" It was the first time he had ever thus spoken to her—the first time he had ever used the word "dear" epithetically in respect to herself. A suspicion flashed to Mrs. Macaulay's mind. Could he possibly mean matrimony? Had the cap and pink ribbons which became her so well, achieved a conquest? Well, certainly she was very lonely—and Mr. Redcliffe was enormously rich: *he* also was lonely: and what could be more natural than that he should make her an offer? what more natural than that she should accept it?

All these ideas crowded one upon another through the ingenious brain of Mrs. Macaulay: she smiled and simpered—rose from her seat—produced a bottle of wine (that at one-and-three from the oilman's in the next street)—and was even about to invite Mr. Redcliffe to sup off his own pie, when he waved his hand in deprecation of these preparatives, and proceeded to explain himself.

"The fact is, my dear madam," he said, choosing to be civil in order to conciliate her, as it was rather a delicate boon he was about to supplicate at her hands,—"you can render me a service."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly became grave, as the hope of matrimony vanished from her mind in an instant.

"But a service, be it understood," proceeded Mr. Redcliffe, "for which I am prepared to pay liberally."

Here Mrs. Macaulay's countenance suddenly brightened up again: for the idea of payment was always a welcome one; and the assurance of liberality in making it, was at all events to a certain degree a salve for the feelings that had just been wounded by disappointment.

"I am sure," she said, "that any service I could render Mr. Redcliffe, shall be cheerfully performed; and I know very well, my dear sir, that you are generous in your recompenses."

"A few words will suffice for explanation," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Accident has enabled me to rescue a young woman from a position into which villany inveigled her. She is genteel and well educated; and I am in hopes of being shortly enabled to restore her to the bosom of her family. But in the meantime I have business of my own to attend to, and which will to-morrow take me out of town—for I know not exactly how long. Now, I must provide Miss O'Brien—for that is her name—with a home."

"And I am sure, sir," Mrs. Macaulay hastened to exclaim, "she can have a comfortable home here. I will be like a mother to her——anything for your sake, and to give you pleasure!"

"Very good, Mrs. Macaulay," observed Redcliffe: "then the matter is settled. Trust to my liberality for your recompense. Watch over this young woman—let her go out as little as possible—and never alone. If her abode be discovered, attempts may be made to inveigle her away, or perhaps to carry her off by force. If when I return I find that she has gone, I shall ascribe all the fault to you: but if she be still with you, your reward shall be munificent. You understand me? Perhaps I ought to add for your own satisfaction, that this young woman is nothing more to me than an object of sympathy and of Christian charity."

"Oh, dear me, sir!" cried Mrs. Macaulay, "it is by no means necessary for you to give me such an assurance! Your character is quite sufficient as a guarantee in that respect. Let the dear creature be introduced to me; and I will treat her with the utmost kindness."

"She will want clothes and pocket-money," continued Mr. Redcliffe: "for inasmuch as she has fled from the place where she has been living, she has brought nothing with her. See that all her wants be attended to."

Thus speaking, Mr. Redcliffe flung some bank-notes upon the table; and hastening up-stairs, speedily re-appeared with Eveleen, whom he presented to Mrs. Macaulay.

Meanwhile Christian Ashton had returned to Marchmont House; and according to the instructions he had received from his ducal employer, he labelled the box in his own name. His preparations for departure in the morning being made, he soon retired to rest. The image of the beautiful Miss Vincent continued uppermost in his mind,—as indeed it had done ever since he beheld her a few nights previously. Three whole days had now elapsed since then; and he had longed to call at Mr. Chubb's on some pretext in order to see her again: but he had not dared to do so, inasmuch as a fitting excuse was wanting. The fact is, Christian was in love with the charming Miss Vincent,—though he did not comprehend the state of his own feelings, nor for a moment suspect the real truth.

The morning dawned upon a night of dreams, in which the image of that fair girl was ever prominent; and having received a supply of money from Mr. Calvert, the Duke's steward, Christian took his departure by the coach for Oaklands, the deal box being amongst his own luggage. It was about two in the afternoon that the coach set him down at the porter's lodge at the entrance of the long sweep of avenue which led through the spacious park. The trees in this January season were denuded of their leaves: but nevertheless, to one who had just arrived from that brick-and-mortar wilderness which constitutes London, the aspect of the spacious domain, with the antique-looking mansion on an eminence in the centre, was cheerful and refreshing. The porter's son—a stalwart lad of about eighteen—shouldered Christian's luggage, and led the way up to the mansion, where our young hero was at once installed in the chamber which he was to occupy. Here, as at Marchmont House, he was to take his meals in the steward's room; and thus there was to be no change in the actual comforts of his position in the Duke's employment.

Having notified his arrival to the Duke of Marchmont, he was sent for in the course of the afternoon into his Grace's presence—and was immediately questioned in respect to the box. He replied that he had brought it with him, and handed the Duke the little packet containing the key.

"You have faithfully executed my instructions," said his Grace; "and I am well pleased with you. No questions were asked in London about the box—I mean by the servants at Marchmont House?"

"None, my lord," replied Christian.

"Good!" said the Duke. "Keep the box for a day or two in your room; and I will then let you know how to dispose of it. Ah! by the bye, Christian, your time will be pretty much your own at Oaklands: for as I have come hither to enjoy myself, I do not mean to be troubled more than I can help with correspondence and so forth."

Christian bowed and withdrew. He presently learnt that the Hon. Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands—but that there were no other guests. He also learnt, in a casual manner from the steward, that it was very seldom the Duke of Marchmont paid Oaklands a visit,—his Grace generally giving the preference to country-seats which he possessed in other counties.

"But this," said Mr. Purvis, the steward, "is scarcely to be wondered at, when we consider the painful impression which the tragedy that took place here seventeen or eighteen years ago, was but too well calculated to make upon his Grace's mind,—an impression which could scarcely wear off altogether, even at this distance of time. You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the steward, who was an old man and disposed to be garrulous, "it was not altogether so much the late Duke's death—he was murdered, you know, poor man!—that so cruelly afflicted his present Grace; but it was the circumstance that this murder was perpetrated by his Grace's own brother!"

"I have read the sorrowful account," said Christian; "and it much shocked me. Have any tidings ever been received of Mr. Bertram Vivian, who committed the murder?"

"None," answered old Purvis. "Of course Mr. Bertram went off at once with the Duchess—I dare say to America, where he had been before; and it is to be supposed they took another name, and did all they could to conceal themselves."

"Were you here at the time of the tragedy?" inquired Christian.

"Yes—I was indeed," responded the old man, shaking his head mournfully. "I was butler then; and it was me and our late Duke's own valet—Leachley by name—who discovered the body of our poor master. One of these days I will take and show you the spot. Ah! Mr. Ashton, it was a shocking thing—a very shocking thing! Of all the servants who were here at the time, I am the only one that now remains. The others have got scattered abroad in one way or another—some risen in the world—some married——in short, I don't know how it has been, but I am the only one left. Ah! talking of Leachley, the late Duke's valet—he married a farmer's daughter about a dozen miles from here; and when the old man died, he took the farm. He has got on well. I see him sometimes: he rides over to the old place to pay me a visit. It's dull enough, I can assure you—accustomed as I was for so long a period of my life, to have the family here for at least half of every year—and such gaieties and festivities!"

"And was the Duchess Elisa very beautiful?" inquired Christian.

"Beautiful?" said the old man: "it is scarcely the word. She was the loveliest creature I ever set eyes upon. But ah! how wicked of her to lose herself with Mr. Bertram—though it did appear they had loved each other before her marriage with the Duke. These are sad topics to converse upon; and yet I don't know how it is, Mr. Ashton, but the saddest topics are sometimes those which one likes to talk of most. Ah, by the bye, I forgot to tell you—speaking of the servants who were here at the time—that there was one young woman—her name was Jane—she was her Grace's principal lady's-maid—she loved her Grace dearly—and when it all took place, the poor creature showed signs of going mad. She did go mad too, a short time after the inquest, and was sent home to her friends. I never heard what became of her: but I should have liked to know, poor thing!"

Again the old butler paused and shook his head gloomily.

"But was it quite certain after all," inquired Christian, "that the Duchess Elisa was guilty in respect to Mr. Bertram Vivian? For I remember to have read in the account which accidentally fell into my hands a little while back——"

"Ah! I think I know to what you allude, Mr. Ashton," interrupted the old steward. "Yes—the late Duke did proclaim his wife's innocence—did declare that he had wronged her; and he dispersed us all about in search of her when she fled from the house. For the moment we rejoiced at the idea of her Grace's innocence: for she was beloved by us all. But then came the murder: and who could have murdered the Duke but Bertram Vivian? and why should he have murdered him, if not to possess himself of his wife? And why should both have disappeared and never since have been heard of? Is it not clear that they fled together?—and if that was the case, must they not have been previously too intimate? Besides, it appeared in the newspapers that the Duke said he had wronged his wife; and she must have seen it—and if she was innocent would she not have come forward?"

"True!" said Christian, with mournfulness of tone and look: for in the natural magnanimity of his character and in the chivalric generosity of his disposition, he would much rather have believed that the beautiful Duchess Eliza, to whose name so sad a romantic interest attached itself, was really innocent.

"Yes, yes—she was guilty," proceeded the old steward: "there can be no doubt about it. I don't know what it was that made the poor Duke suddenly think otherwise: but I *do* know that the present Duke behaved most admirably in the matter, and did all he could to soften down his uncle's feelings and effect a reconciliation. Ah! you should have seen his Grace—I mean the present Duke—when he gave his evidence at the inquest——how he was overcome by his feelings!—for he loved his brother Bertram dearly. Ah! when I think of it, it brings tears into my eyes. But the evidence was too convincing. The dog, you know, had torn off a piece of the murderer's coat—which was proved to have been that of Mr. Bertram. And then too there was the dagger——it is still here at Oaklands, Mr. Ashton," added the steward in a low voice; "and one of these days I will show it to you."

When Christian was again alone, he thought to himself what a pity it was that the Duke of Marchmont should have become so changed from the admirable character he appeared to have been at the time of the tragedy. *Then*, as all accounts concurred in representing, he exhibited the most generous feelings and the most magnanimous disposition: but *now* how different was he!—darkly and treacherously compassing the ruin of the beautiful and virtuous woman whom he had sworn at the altar to love, cherish, and protect! Christian was shocked when he reflected on the contrast between the man of the time of the tragedy, and the man of the present day.

On the following morning Purvis, the steward, accompanied Christian in a ramble through the grounds. The old man had never been married, and had no relations on the face of the earth—at least not to his knowledge. He possessed a kindly disposition, and easily attached himself to any one whom he had reason to esteem. He had already taken a fancy to Christian—was pleased with the youth's manners—and gratified by the attention with which his garrulity was listened to. Leaning on our young hero's arm, he walked with him through the grounds, pointing out particular spots of interest. He then led him along the road by the side of which the Duke's corpse was discovered; and he indicated the very pond on the edge of which the unfortunate nobleman had been thus found, with his face downward, one of his hands in the water, and the dagger sticking in his back. Christian shuddered; and the steward perceived that he thus trembled with horror.

"The country-people in these parts," said old Purvis, "will not, if they can avoid it, pass this spot after dusk. They say, Mr. Ashton, that a strange unearthly shape has been seen moving round about the pond—and that the low howlings of a dog have been heard. Of course I don't believe it myself: I am not superstitious; and yet if ever the dead did walk, the murder of the poor Duke was horrible enough to make his restless spirit return to the scene of so foul an assassination."

The old man and our young hero retraced their way slowly towards the mansion,—on approaching which they perceived the Hon. Mr. Stanhope walking with the Duchess in the grounds. Christian glanced towards the steward, to see whether the spectacle produced any effect upon him: but Purvis, suspecting no evil, took it quite as a matter of course; and therefore Christian made no remark.

It was about half-past ten in the evening, that our hero retired to his chamber somewhat fatigued—as he had rambled about, either with the old steward or else alone, for the greater portion of the day. He was beginning to undress himself, when he heard the door gently open; and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance.

"Ah! I am just in time," said his Grace, closing the door behind him, "to prevent you from getting to bed. I want you to do me a little service tonight. What it is I will explain presently. In about an hour I will return. Light your fire—I see that it is laid in the grate—and amuse yourself with a book till I come back to you."

Having thus spoken, the Duke of Marchmont retired; and Christian could not help associating the as yet unexplained service with the box containing the counterpart dresses. He lighted the fire: he had now no longer the least inclination for sleep—he was anxious to ascertain the next step that was to be taken in the conspiracy wherein the Duke was embarked, but which he himself was secretly studying, in connexion with Redcliffe, to frustrate. He took up a volume, and whiled away the time until close upon midnight,—when the door again opened and the Duke of Marchmont made his appearance. His Grace was enveloped in a cloak and had his hat on: it was therefore evident he was going out somewhere.

"Now, my young friend," he said, patting Christian familiarly on the back, and speaking to him also in a more familiar manner than he had ever yet adopted towards his young secretary, "you are to do me the service I require. I see that I can trust you in everything—as indeed I ought to be enabled to do; for a secretary, you know, is always a confidential person, and from whom an employer is not disposed to keep things secret. Besides, you displayed so much discretion in the way you managed the little business I entrusted to you previous to my departure from London, that comparatively trifling though it were, the result has been to win for you my esteem. I think I told you, Christian," continued the Duke of Marchmont, now affecting to speak in a careless off-hand manner, "that the box contains certain little presents which I am anxious to make; and they are for the principal tenants' wives and daughters on my estates. I mean to surprise some of them, so that they sha'n't know from whom the things come. It is a freak of mine—and I have my own way of carrying it out. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," answered Christian, preserving his countenance as changeless as possible. "It is for your Grace to give your orders, and I am ready to obey them."

"You are going a little distance with me," proceeded Marchmont; "and I must trouble you to bring the box along with you. It is not very heavy. Indeed it only contains gown-pieces of silk and muslin—a few shawls, caps, and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs—and those kind of trifles that Madame Angelique can supply as tastefully as she can richer and costlier things."

Christian knew that Marchmont was giving utterance to as complete a tissue of falsehoods as ever were unblushingly poured forth. He however said not a word; but hastily putting on an upper coat and his hat, shouldered the box,—having previously torn off the label in compliance with a hint to that effect on the part of his Grace. The Duke extinguished the candle that was burning in the room, whence he led the way, and conducted Christian to the private staircase in another part of the spacious building. This they descended: the Duke opened the door at the bottom, by means of a key which he had about him; and they issued forth into the grounds.

The night was dark and windy. No moon was visible on the face of heaven—no stars were twinkling: but sombre clouds were flying fast high over head. The skeleton branches of the trees were dimly perceptible through the obscurity: the evergreen shrubs, dotting the garden at frequent intervals, looked like human shapes. Through the grounds the Duke led the way in silence,—Christian carrying the box; and they soon entered upon that very road along which Mr. Purvis, the old steward, had conducted our hero in the morning, and by the side of which was the pond where the fatal tragedy was enacted.

"The night is bitter cold," said the Duke, at length breaking silence. "The wind is high too. You seem to stagger beneath the box?"

"Not at all, my lord," answered Ashton. "But how strangely the wind moans! It really seems as if it were the voice of the dead—or rather of the dying."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Marchmont: "the wind is natural enough in its sounds. Never give way to superstitious thoughts."

A silence again ensued: but as they approached the spot where Christian knew the pond was situated, he could not prevent a certain gloomy sensation from creeping over him. It was not that he was naturally superstitious: very far from it;—but he had been told by Purvis that the country-people of those parts reported strange sights to have been seen and strange noises to have been heard in the neighbourhood of that pond, and that they did not choose to pass it after dusk. But even setting aside these circumstances, Christian knew that a horrible murder had been perpetrated on the brink of that pond; and the consciousness thereof was not calculated to engender very agreeable associations. And now too, he could not help thinking that it was indelicate to a degree, and indicative of a hardened mind on the part of the Duke of Marchmont, to be threading this very road and passing by that very spot, when evidently engaged in taking some step in the carrying out of a foully designed treachery.

While thus engaged in thought, Christian became aware, by a particular turning of the road, that they were now in the close vicinage of the pond; and it was not without a shudder that in a few moments he caught sight of the water which was dimly glimmering in the obscurity of the night. But he said nothing. He felt that if the Duke were thus hardened enough to pass the spot when intent on deeds of evil, he himself would not be indelicate enough to make the slightest allusion to a tragedy which ought to be so memorable in the Marchmont family. He perceived however that the Duke quickened his pace as he passed by the pond—so that Christian had some little difficulty in keeping up with him, the box on his shoulder forming a resistance to the gushing wind which blew right against it. Marchmont however soon slackened his pace again; and at a distance of about a hundred yards beyond the scene of the murder, he struck into a bye lane,—Christian following him. A short distance down this lane there appeared a tolerably-sized farm-house, with a little garden in front. The Duke opened the gate and passed on to the entrance, with Christian close behind. The obscurity was not too great to prevent our hero from perceiving that the place had a sombre and desolate look. There was the farm-yard—but quiet as the grave: and yet the gate had swung back with a din which would have aroused the cackling of geese and ducks, or the barking of a dog, if any were there.

The Duke knocked at the door: it was presently opened by an old woman with tottering gait, and whose head shook as if she had the palsy. She carried a light in her hand: and evidently recognising the Duke in a moment, said something which Christian did not catch. His Grace answered her quickly—as if by the very rapidity as well as brevity of his utterance enjoining her to silence; and then he bade Christian deposit the box in the passage. This the youth did; and the Duke at once hurried him away from the place.

They now retraced their steps down the lane into the road,—our hero wondering the while for what earthly reason the box could have been taken to that lonely destination. The Duke said nothing; and they walked on together. Again they were approaching the pond: but when just within sight of it, an ejaculation burst from our young hero's lips; and under the influence of the sudden feeling which thus smote him, he caught the Duke forcibly by the arm.

"Look, look, my lord!" he said: "that shape!"

And sure enough a dark shape was moving in the vicinage of the pond. It was no delusion—it was palpable—a human form seen through the obscurity, darker than the darkness!

"Ah!" and the Duke stopped short.

The next moment the shape thus seen, moved away from the pond round the bend of the road, and was absorbed in the obscurity of the night.

"It is nothing," said the Duke: but Christian thought that his Grace spoke in a tone which was more or less troubled. "It is some wayfarer. Let us see."

His Grace proceeded onward at a rapid rate,—Christian keeping up with him. Had the traveller—if it were one—been going at anything like a moderate rate, he must have been overtaken: but no one was to be seen.

"I dare say he has cut across the fields," said the Duke of Marchmont, after a while relaxing his pace again: then as if stricken by a sudden thought, he demanded of Christian, "Why were you frightened? what made you clutch me as if in such terror?"

"I beg your Grace's pardon," said our young hero: "I know it was a great liberty on my part——"

"No, no—I did not allude to it in that light," said Marchmont: "you of course could not help it—you were smitten with alarm—and that is the truth of it—eh?"

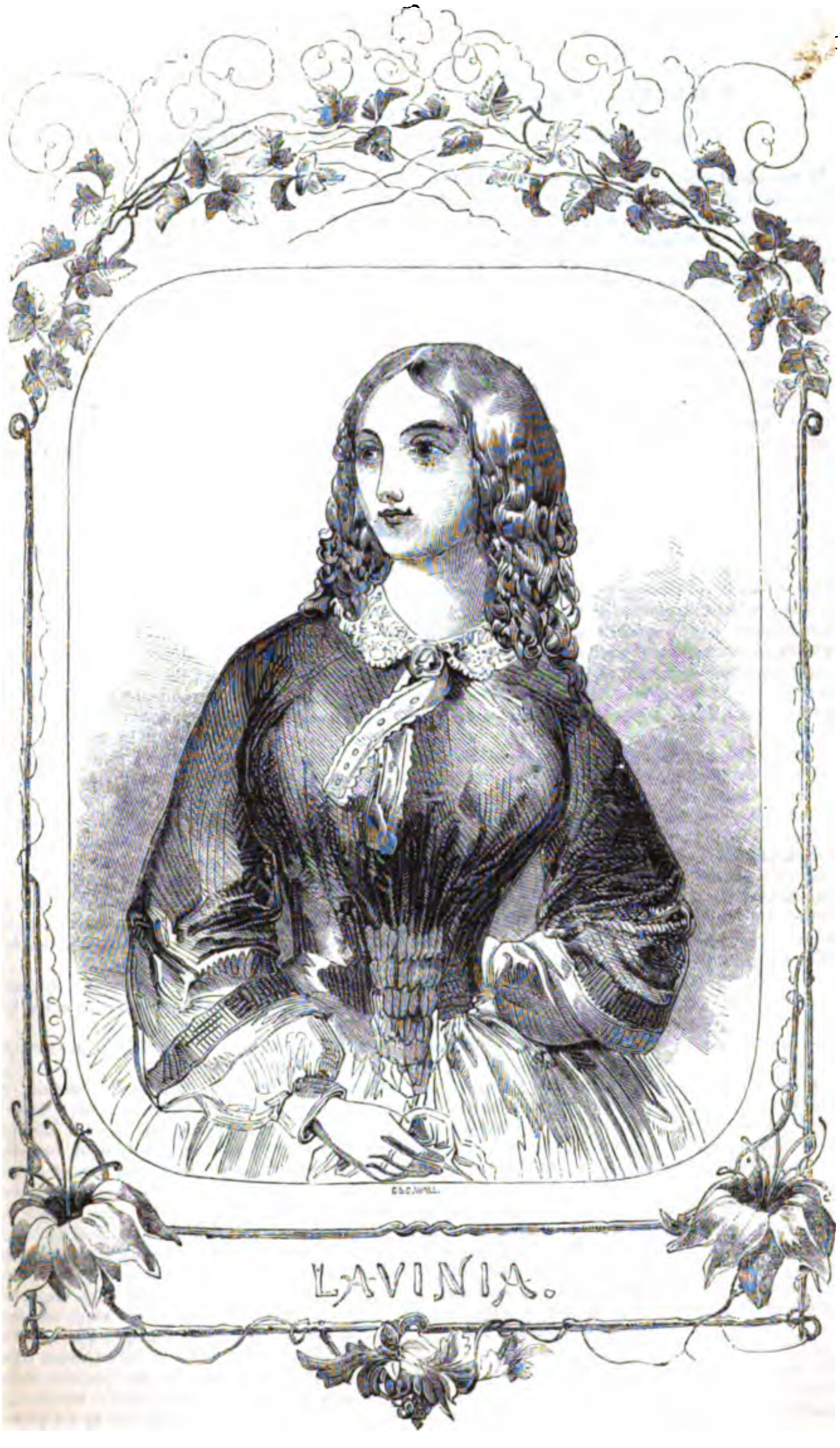
"I confess that it was so, my lord," rejoined Christian. "The fact is, I walked this way in the morning; and Mr. Purvis, who was with me, pointed out the spot——"

"Ah! and I dare say," exclaimed the Duke, "he told you the old gossips' tales about the place. Deeply as I revere the memory of my deceased uncle, yet I am not given, Christian, to superstitious terrors. It is weak and unmanly to yield to them. I counselled you against such influences as we were coming along the road ere now: remember my advice for the future."

A silence ensued; and in a short time the grounds of the mansion were reached.

"I need not say, my young friend," observed the Duke, in a low tone, "that our midnight expedition is to be kept entirely secret. Of course you understand this much. You see that I trust you; and you must in every sense render yourself worthy of my confidence. Ah! by the bye, when I think of it—the maid who does out your room may notice the absence of the box. Should she allude to it in your presence, you can easily devise some excuse—that you sent it back to London by the coach—or off somewhere by the carrier, for some purpose or another——anything, in short, that comes into your head. It will be a little falsehood that is venial enough, and will all the more effectually assist the carrying out of my freakish project."

At this moment the door of the secret staircase was reached: the Duke opened it by means of the key which he had about him; and wishing Christian "good night," he retired to his own apartment, while our hero sought his chamber to ponder



LAVINIA.

upon all that had occurred—for he certainly felt but little inclination for sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LETTICE RODNEY.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning following the night of which we have been speaking, that Lettice Rodney awoke in a chamber around which her eyes slowly wandered with an expression as if she were not over well satisfied with her quarters. It was a large room, furnished in an antiquated style, and of gloomy aspect,—though some recent preparations had evidently been made to give it an air of comfort. The latticed windows were small; the ceiling was low; the walls were of wainscot; the chairs were of a dark wood, massive and heavy. The same might be said of the bedstead: but the bedding materials themselves were all new; and these, together with the draperies, were of a superior quality to the other appointments of the chamber. It was this circumstance which indicated how recent arrangements had been made to render the place more habitable than it would otherwise have been.

Lettice Rodney awoke, as we have said, at about nine o'clock: and looking around her, she seemed smitten with the gloom of her quarters. In a few minutes, however, when she grew more completely awake, a smile appeared upon her exceedingly handsome countenance, as she murmured to herself, "But, after all, it is a change and a novelty; and I am to be most munificently recompensed?"

She raised herself up in the couch—rested her elbow upon the pillow—and sustained her head with her hand. In that position she would have formed an admirable study for the pencil of an artist. No corset now imprisoned the contours of her shape, which therefore took their own natural and voluptuous developments. Her glossy brown hair floated negligently over the hand which sustained her head, and over the shoulders which were covered with the snowy night-dress. Pleasure and dissipation had not marred the gorgeous beauty of her form: the rounded and full undulations of the bust retained their proper position, as if all the freshness of youth had remained associated with the exuberant charms of a superb womanhood. The sweeping length of her limbs was delineated by the bed-clothes: all the flowing outlines of her form were traceable, and could be followed by the eye, if an observer had been present. The semi-languor which accompanies the first few minutes of the morn's awakening, gave a certain expression of sensuousness to her countenance,—or rather softly deepened that which it habitually wore. She was a splendid creature, well-grown and fresh coloured; but the fulness of her contours stopped short just at that degree of luxuriance when they touched upon *embonpoint*—while the hue upon her cheeks was not the ruddiness of the rustic hoyden, but the carnation glow upon a finely grained skin. Her lips were of coral redness—habitually moist—and seeming to invite fervid kisses, as well as to be enabled to give them back with a kindred ardour. Her teeth were somewhat large, but of ivory whiteness and faultlessly even: her nose was straight—her forehead high. It has already been stated that she was about two-and-twenty; and since the age of fifteen had she dwelt under the evil auspices of Madame Angelique. Her temperament was naturally luxurious: she had fallen an easy victim to the wiles of that abominable woman; and as she was an orphan, she had no happy home to regret. On the contrary: of the four females whom we introduced to the reader at the milliner's establishment, Lettice was the one least accessible to remorseful feelings, and most inclined to abandon herself fully and completely to the mode of existence she was pursuing.

She lay half-reclining upon her pillow in that apartment around which her eyes wandered by no means lovingly at first: yet, as we have seen, she consoled herself quickly enough for this change in her quarters, by the reflection that there was novelty in it, and that she was embarking in some adventure which would remunerate her well, though she as yet scarcely comprehended the precise nature of the services required at her hands. While she lay thinking, the door opened slowly; and an old woman, with trembling limbs, and head shaking as if it were palsied, made her appearance. She was followed by a buxom-looking young girl of about seventeen, and who was the old woman's granddaughter. This girl carried a large deal box, which was corded, and which she set down upon the floor.

"Ah! then," said Lettice, as she beheld the box, "some one has been this morning?"

"No, ma'am—it was in the middle of the night," answered the old woman: and in a mysterious manner, she added, "It was the Duke himself, together with a young gentleman. His Grace told me yesterday morning—as I think I mentioned to you, ma'am—that I was to sit up, as it was most likely some one would be calling."

"I must have slept soundly enough, Mrs. Norwood," observed Lettice: "for I heard no noise of doors opening. I shall get up now. And Phœbe," she added, addressing herself to the girl, "see that you get me the best breakfast you can possibly accomplish. But, dear me, what a place this is—so lonely and desolate!"

"Ah! it was once thriving enough, ma'am," said Mrs. Norwood, "when the late farmer had it."

"And how long has the place been in this condition?" inquired Lettice.

"Oh! upward of the last twelve months, or so," responded the old woman. "His Grace's bailiff let me and my granddaughter live here for nothing, just to keep the rooms aired and take care of the furniture, till some new tenant comes. You see, ma'am, the person who had it last, was a bachelor; and he went on at such a pace he soon got ruined and was sent to gaol for debt, where he died of a fever brought on by hard drinking. There was more than a year's rent owing; and so his Grace's bailiff kept the furniture in the house. All the farm stock was sold off; and now there isn't so much as a hen to lay an egg. However, thanks to his Grace's liberality, there is everything in the place to make you comfortable, ma'am, while you are here."

The old woman withdrew, followed by her granddaughter: Lettice rose and dressed herself; and on descending to a parlour on the ground-floor, she found an excellent repast in readiness. Scarcely had she finished, when the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the house.

"I am glad that you have come," said Lettice, as he entered the room: and she spoke half poutingly, half smilingly: "for really you have consigned me to an abode of incomparable dulness."

"But everything is done, my dear girl, to conduce to your comfort," said his Grace, tapping her familiarly on the cheek. "I ordered these people to attend to your slightest wants, and even to anticipate them. After all, you do not look so very unhappy; and you certainly are not pining away. On the contrary, the fresh air of the country has brought a richer colour to your cheeks; and they invite what I am now about to bestow upon them."

Thus speaking, the Duke kissed each plump and carnation-hued cheek; and then, by way of variety, he paid a similar compliment to the dewy richness of Lettice Rodney's lips.

"And now that you have thus refreshed yourself, my dear Marchmont," she laughingly and familiarly said, "perhaps you will have the kindness to enter a little more deeply into explanations than you have hitherto done? The box of dresses has arrived, I find——"

"And to-morrow evening, one must be made use of," rejoined the Duke. "Listen to me attentively, my dear Lettice; and I will tell you precisely how you are to act."

Marchmont then detailed such explanations as were requisite for the furtherance of his treacherous scheme: but it is not consistent with the immediate requirements of our narrative that we should chronicle them. Suffice it to observe that Lettice Rodney promised to fulfil the Duke's instructions on all points; and she received from him an earnest of his munificence in the form of a small casket containing several exquisite and costly articles of jewellery.

"To-morrow night, therefore, my dear Lettice!" said the Duke, as he rose to take his departure. "But recollect that you do not stir abroad in the daytime: you can take plenty of exercise in the large enclosed garden at the back of the house. I took care," he continued, glancing towards some book-shelves, "to provide you with numerous novels and interesting works: and, by the bye, I have brought you a quantity of newspapers."

Thus speaking, his Grace drew forth a packet of journals, which he placed upon the table; and after a little more conversation, he took his departure. Presently the young woman Phœbe entered the room to clear away the breakfast-things; and Lettice, who was standing at the window, inquired, "What is the distance from the bottom of this lane to Oaklands?"

"I should think about a mile and a quarter," was Phœbe Norwood's response. "If you are going there, ma'am, you can't possibly mistake the road: it is pretty nearly straight—except close by the pond, where the late Duke was murdered; and there it takes a sort of turn."

"Ah!" ejaculated Lettice, with a shudder: "the pond where the late Duke was murdered is on the road-side?"—and then she said to herself, "A comfortable spot to pass at night-time!"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," rejoined Phœbe; "that's the spot where his Grace was murdered a matter of eighteen years ago, or thereabouts. Grandmother says," she added in a half-hushed voice, "that he walks."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lettice hastily.

"I mean, ma'am," answered the girl, "that the late Duke's ghost haunts the place; and what's more, the howlings of his dog have been heard at the same spot in the night-time."

"How absurd!" ejaculated Lettice; but a shade nevertheless came over her countenance—and for the remainder of the day she felt an oppression of spirits such as she had not experienced for a long, long time.

It must be observed that this day of which we have been writing, was Friday. On the following day Christian Ashton had to meet Mr. Redcliffe in the neighbourhood of the turnpike on the Winchester road. The weather was remarkably fine for that January season; and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon of this Saturday, Christian set out on his walk from Oaklands. As he was proceeding through the grounds he perceived the Duchess of Marchmont walking with the Hon. Mr. Stanhope. She was not however leaning on his arm: nor was there aught in her look to denote that she experienced any particular pleasure in the society of her companion.

We have already said that Lavinia was in her thirty-second year—that she was tall and finely formed. Her hair was of a light auburn, which she habitually wore in massive tresses; and which, as they now floated beneath the simple straw-bonnet which she had put on for her ramble, formed a lustrous framework for a countenance of the most interesting beauty. Her profile was faultless. The forehead was high, and dazzlingly fair,—the delicate tracery of blue veins being visible beneath the pure transparent skin. Her nose was perfectly straight: the eyebrows, many shades darker than the hair, were finely arched. The large blue eyes had a soft and pensive expression: more beauteous eyes never graced a female countenance! The lashes were darker still than the brows, and thickly fringed the lids. Nothing could excel the classic chiselling of the lips, which were of bright vermilion; and when the Duchess smiled, those lips revealed two rows of teeth resembling pearls. The delicately rounded chin completed the oval of that beauteous countenance,—the complexion of which was chastely fair, with only the tint of the rose-leaf upon the cheeks. To gaze upon that charming face—to observe the goodness of disposition which the large blue eyes expressed—it would seem impossible that any man was possessed of a soul black enough to harbour evil thoughts against this lady. Indeed she possessed every charm of countenance and of figure, as well as of mind, to inspire admiration, love, and respect.

The symmetry of Lavinia's form was complete. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the neck, or the dazzling whiteness of the throat. The shoulders sloped gently, thus imperceptibly as it were blending with the arms. The bust was finely modelled, but modestly concealed by a dress with a high *corsage;* and this was the invariable style adopted by Lavinia, whose pure taste and delicacy of feeling would have revolted against any meretricious display of her charms. Elegance was the principal characteristic of her gait and carriage; though her height, rather than her bearing, invested her with a certain degree of dignity. There was however about her none of that pride—much less that majesty of demeanour, which the imagination is apt to associate with the rank of a Duchess. Indeed, to gaze upon her one would have thought that a less brilliant sphere would have far better suited her tastes and disposition: though it must not be inferred from these observations, that she was deficient in any of the becoming qualities for the social position which she occupied.

As Christian passed Mr. Stanhope and the Duchess, he raised his hat; and her Grace bestowed upon him a kind word and a friendly smile. While continuing his way, he felt more than ever rejoiced that accident should have rendered him instrumental in discovering the diabolical plots which were in existence against the peace of mind of this amiable lady; and he had such confidence in the wisdom and determination of Clement Redcliffe, that he had no doubt as to the complete discomfiture of the conspirators. Hastening onward, he in a short time reached the turnpike; and at a little distance he beheld Mr. Redcliffe walking slowly along, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat drawn more than ever over his countenance. After hasty greetings were exchanged, Redcliffe conducted Christian across the fields to a lonely little cottage, inhabited by an elderly couple; and here it appeared that he had taken up his quarters. His lodgings consisted of a small but neat parlour and a bed-chamber. The dwelling was altogether secluded; and Redcliffe gave Christian to understand that the elderly couple were not of prying or inquisitive dispositions, and that therefore he had been most fortunate in discovering such a retreat.

"And now, my young friend," he said, "what intelligence have you for me?"

Christian stated that Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands, and that he daily walked out with the Duchess. He then proceeded to explain how the Duke of Marchmont had made him convey the box to the farm-house at a late hour on the Thursday night—and how it was left there. Christian also mentioned the circumstance of having seen some shape moving about in the vicinage of the pond during the walk homeward on the occasion referred to.

"I perceive," said Mr. Redcliffe, after having reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, "that the incident you have just related, produced some little sensation of awe upon your mind. But the Duke, you tell me, bade you be careful how you yielded to superstitious fears. I also repeat that advice; and perhaps I can give it with a clearer conscience than he. Yes, Christian, it was no doubt some wayfarer——or midnight wanderer," added Mr. Redcliffe slowly, "whose form you beheld upon that spot at that hour. But it is clear," he went on to observe, speaking more quickly, "that the plot is now progressing fast, and that the incidents are thickening. It is time that I should explain to you something which I had not the opportunity to do when you came to me last Tuesday evening. To my comprehension there is no mystery in respect to the box. You heard, from Eveleen O'Brien's lips, that it contained dresses which are the precise duplicates of others recently made for the Duchess of Marchmont. Those dresses, Christian, will be doubtless worn by some one who is to personate the Duchess——Ah! now you understand the full extent of the villany of which the Duke is capable!"

"I do indeed, sir," responded Christian; almost smitten with dismay as the light thus dawned in upon his mind. "But how will you frustrate this portion of the diabolical conspiracy?"

"Fear not, my young friend," answered Redcliffe. "Rest assured that innocence and virtue shall yet triumph over the most villanous treachery. Come to me again the moment you have anything fresh to impart: but if nothing should transpire for a few days, do not revisit me until the middle of the ensuing week. We must be upon our guard, so as to take no step that may excite suspicion."

After a little further discourse, Christian took his departure and returned to Oaklands.

It was about eleven o'clock in the night of this same day, that Lettice Rodney issued forth from the lonely farm-house. She wore an ample cloak over her dress: a thick veil covered her countenance. The night was beautiful and starlit: the air was frosty, with an invigorating freshness totally different from that damp chill which makes the form shiver and the teeth chatter. Quickly threading the lane, Lettice entered upon the road, —on gaining which she endeavoured to hum an opera-air to keep up her spirits, or rather to persuade herself that there was no superstitious terror in her mind as she pursued her way in a neighbourhood rendered so fearfully memorable by an appalling murder. All of a sudden, however, she stopped short and turned hastily round: for it struck her that she heard footsteps following over the hard frost-bound road. At the same instant that she thus looked back, she fancied that she caught a glimpse of some dark form disappearing in the shade of the hedge which skirted the road. She was not naturally a coward—very far from it: but she could not help trembling all over, half with a superstitious fear, and half with the dread lest some evil-disposed person should be dogging her footsteps. She was somewhat inclined to retrace her way to the farm-house: but this would be to abandon the enterprise in which she had embarked, and on account of which she had already received so signal a proof of the Duke of Marchmont's munificence. Therefore, mustering up all her courage, she continued her route.

In a few minutes she reached the pond which she knew to have been the spot where the murder was committed, although she was now threading this road for the first time. Through the folds of her veil her eyes glanced rapidly around; and she could scarcely keep back a scream as she beheld, either in fancy or reality, a dark shape on the opposite side of the hedge which bounded the pond. It instantaneously disappeared;—and speeding forward, Lettice strove hard to persuade herself that it was merely imagination.

"Nevertheless," she thought, "if these nocturnal journeys are to be frequently repeated, I must positively solicit his Grace to give me some escort. Not," she added, as she thus mused, "that I am afraid of preternatural appearances ——no, no—*that* is sheer nonsense!——but it is not altogether safe thus to be out so late and in such a lonely road. Yes—assuredly it was only my imagination——and yet it was strange that I should twice fancy I beheld that dark shape!"

Lettice continued her way—but frequently glancing around, and ever and anon pausing to listen whether footsteps were in reality pursuing her. Nothing more however occurred to frighten her; and as she entered the grounds belonging to Oaklands, she felt ashamed of the apprehensions to which she had given way.

The Duke had so accurately described the exact path which she was to take through the shrubberies and the gardens, that she had no difficulty in following his instructions—especially as she was so well aided by the clear starlight. That starlight bathed the antique edifice in its argentine lustre, and made the tall chimneys and the pointed roofs stand out in bold relief against the blue sky. All was still, save the rustling of the evergreens as well as of her own dress, and the light tread of her footsteps as she bent her way towards the private door, which, as well as the other details of her route, had been accurately described by the Duke of Marchmont. On reaching that door, she gave three gentle taps; and it was immediately opened by the Duke himself. She entered: he closed the door—and conducted her into a little room opening from a passage. Here a light was burning; and he made her sit down and rest herself for a few minutes. He drew the cork of a champagne-bottle; and the exhilarating influence of the wine cheered her spirits to an extent that she resolved to keep silent as to the circumstances which had affrighted her during her walk from the farm-house.

She now, by the Duke's bidding, took off her bonnet and cloak; and she appeared in one of the dresses which had come down in the box.

"It is most fortunate," said Marchmont, "that her Grace wore the exact counterpart of that dress this evening. Now take the veil from the bonnet and just throw it over your head, so as to shade your countenance and cover the hair."

These instructions were obeyed; and the Duke said, "You must follow me on tiptoe. We shall not take the candle with us: but there will be light enough through the windows of the staircase and passages to enable you to see your way."

The Duke conducted Lettice Rodney up the private staircase along a passage: then they threaded another corridor,—thus reaching the extremity of the building, which was farthest from the one whence they had come.

"Here!" said the Duke: and gently tapping at a door, it was instantaneously opened by the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

Lettice passed in; and the Duke hastened away.

The principal lady's-maid of the Duchess of Marchmont, was a young woman named Amy Sutton. She was tall and handsome—about four-and-twenty years of age—and of very excellent character. She was however of a cold disposition, which often merged into a morose sullenness when with her fellow-servants; though she had never any occasion to display her humours in the presence of her mistress. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and calculating—exceedingly fond of money—but with a certain pride, rather than principle, which prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment her hoards. Though handsome, yet if closely regarded, it would be seen that she had a certain decision of look indicating much of her real disposition, and which at times became sinister in its aspect. If ever a fashionable rake or a patrician libertine, seizing an opportunity, ventured to pat her cheek, her eyes would flame up and her countenance would express a savage fierceness; and if an improper overture were whispered in her ear, she would unhesitatingly reward the individual with the soundest box that his own ear had ever received. She was too selfish in her disposition to entertain any real affection for her mistress—and too independent in character to simulate that which her heart did not feel. At the same time she was perfectly respectful in her conduct, as well as assiduous in her duties; and as the natural amiability of Lavinia prompted her to be kind and indulgent towards her dependants, Amy Sutton's temper was never put to the test by a word or look on the part of her mistress. Thus it was not difficult for Amy to conceal from her Grace whatsoever was rugged, worldly-minded, or sinister in her constitution; while her honesty, her unimpeachable character, and her regularity in performing her duties, rendered her more or less a favourite with her Grace.

It must here be observed that the Duchess of Marchmont, though of such high rank, was not one of those fine ladies who cannot do a single thing for themselves, and who require every detail of the toilet—morning, noon, evening, and night—to be performed by the hands of female attendants. Her Grace, on the contrary, dispensed as much as possible with the attentions of her maids on these points, and only invoked their aid for such services as she could not very well render unto herself. All this the Duke of course well knew: and he was therefore aware that when his wife retired for the night, she very speedily dismissed the attendant handmaid whose turn it was to be upon duty,—preferring to disapparel herself and arrange her hair with her own hands.

The Duchess had sought her chamber about half-an-hour previous to the introduction of Lettice Rodney into the mansion. It was Amy Sutton's turn to attend upon her Grace; and, as usual, she was dismissed for the night a few minutes after accompanying Lavinia to her chamber. Marchmont had watched from the end of the corridor—himself remaining unseen—until Amy quitted her Grace's room and ascended to her own; and then was it that he stole down the private staircase to await the three raps at the door which were to signalise Lettice Rodney's arrival. He was not kept long waiting, as the reader has seen.

Now that we have given these requisite explanations, we resume the thread of our narrative. Having introduced Lettice into Mr. Stanhope's chamber, the Duke of Marchmont stole up-stairs to the floor above, and knocked at Amy Sutton's door. The maid hastened to open it,—for she had not as yet begun to undress herself; and on hearing the summons, it immediately struck her that one of her fellow-domestics must be taken ill. She was surprised at beholding the Duke,—surprised only, but not startled: for it was in her nature to take things very coolly. For a moment the thought struck her that his Grace was now visiting her for a particular purpose, which she would have resented in no measured terms: but this idea was immediately dissipated when a glance showed her how troubled appeared his countenance. Indeed, Marchmont had studiously put on an excited and agitated look; while perhaps a certain sense of the deep villany in which he was engaged, rendered his features pale, and gave an air of reality to the troubled look which he thus assumed.

Placing his finger upon his lip to enjoin silence, he beckoned the maid to follow him. This she unhesitatingly did: for she saw—or at least fancied she saw—that there was something wrong, and she had no fear of any improper treatment on the Duke's part,—in the first place, because he seemed to meditate nothing of the sort; and in the second place, because she had the fullest confidence in her own power to repulse and resent it, if he did. He had come without a light: she was at first about to follow with her own: but he made a sign for her to leave it; and she accompanied him down the staircase.

There was a sitting-room on the same floor as the principal bed-chambers of the establishment; and into this Marchmont led Amy.

"Young woman," he said, rendering his voice hoarse and thick, and speaking too in a low tone, as if he were indeed profoundly agitated,—"I do not for a minute imagine—I cannot suppose, indeed, that you are an accomplice——"

"In what, my lord?" asked Amy, somewhat indignantly. "I am an accomplice in nothing wrong."

"Be not offended!" was Marchmont's hasty response. "You will make allowances for me—you will pity me, when you learn the frightful truth!"

"What is it, my lord?" she demanded.

"Your mistress, Amy," rejoined Marchmont, now forcing himself to speak in accents of deep concentrated bitterness,—"your mistress is unfaithful to me!"

"No, my lord," replied Amy, firmly and indignantly.

"Ah! I do not blame you for thus thinking so well of her Grace. Good heavens! that such profligacy should be concealed by so much apparent meekness! Alas, it is too true, Amy—or else my eyes must have strangely deceived me! But tell me,—for I notice not such things generally—what kind of a dress was it that your mistress had on this evening? Was it such-a-one?"—and the Duke gave some explanations.

"Yes, my lord: that was certainly the dress," responded Amy Sutton. "But it is impossible——"

"I tell you it is but too true!" ejaculated the Duke, in a tone of passionate vehemence. "I was proceeding to my own chamber—the taper accidently went out—at that moment I heard light footsteps proceeding with unmistakable stealthiness along the passage. A suspicion that there was something wrong induced me to hide in a doorway and watch——"

"And then, my lord?" said Amy Sutton.

"And then I beheld your mistress proceed along that corridor; and she entered——good heavens! that I should have harboured such a villain——she entered, I tell you, the miscreant Stanhope's chamber!"

Naturally cold and unexcitable though Amy Sutton was, she could not help being startled by this intelligence; and when she gazed into the Duke's countenance — on which the starlight beamed through the window—she thought she read in his looks, which seemed wild and haggard, the fullest confirmation of the tale. Nevertheless, she said after a few minutes' silence, "It must be a mistake, my lord. Some other female——"

"But the dress, Amy?—how could I possibly be mistaken? The light pouring in through the casement at the end of the corridor, showed me the dress. It is true that your mistress seemed to have a veil upon her head——Does she possess a black veil?"

"Yes, my lord—several," responded Amy.

"Well then, she had a veil upon her head," continued the Duke, still speaking as if he were immensely troubled. "Alas, there cannot be a doubt of it! And now I recollect a thousand little things which have hitherto appeared trivial—a thousand little circumstances which only now assume an air of importance! Vainly have I invited Stanhope to ride out with me—to go hunting or shooting. No!—he has always had his excuses—he preferred remaining in the drawing-room——Oh, I shall go mad!"

The Duke paced to and fro in the apartment, with an agitation so well feigned, that Amy Sutton, shrewd though she were, could not for an instant suppose it to be a mere detestable hypocrisy. She however lost none of her habitual coolness; and stepping up to the Duke, who accordingly stopped short in his apparently agitated walk, she said, "Nothing is more easy, my lord, than to clear up this matter at once."

"To be sure!" he ejaculated, as if suddenly recalled to a sense of what he ought to do; "and that was my motive in fetching you from your room! Go, Amy, to her Grace's apartment. If you should happen to find her there——and God send that you may!—you can easily invent some excuse for the intrusion:"—but Marchmont perfectly well knew that Amy Sutton was not a person to undertake any such mission; or else he would have been careful to go upon some other tack.

"No my lord," she at once said in a firm and peremptory manner, "I will not run the risk of being blamed for an impertinent intrusion. It is for your lordship to go to your wife's apartment."

"No, no, Amy," he said, with the air of one who was distracted; "I am not sufficiently the master of my own actions! But we will watch——Yes! that will be the better plan. We will watch in the passage—we will see who it is that issues forth from Stanhope's chamber! I may have wrongly described the dress: but you will be enabled to tell me. Besides, as I have made you my confidante in this most deplorable as well as most delicate business, you must remain with me to keep such watch."

"I will, my lord," answered the young woman: "for I cannot help thinking there must be some terrible mistake. But supposing it should be as your Grace fears,—you will pardon me for advising that you take no precipitate step."

"Amy, I am in that state of mind," ejaculated Marchmont, "when any advice is most welcome—most useful! Your's shall be followed—and I thank you for it. Come!—we will watch at this door. Even if we stay for hours will we watch!"

Marchmont and Amy Sutton accordingly posted themselves at the door of the room where this conversation had taken place. They kept the door ajar in such a manner that they could both look forth into the corridor; and thus in a profound silence did about twenty minutes pass away. Then a door was heard to open gently at a little distance: the Duke nudged his companion as if in an excited manner; and she murmured, "Hush!" in the lowest possible tone.

Footsteps were heard stealing along the corridor—then the rustling of a dress; and in about a minute a figure passed with apparent cautiousness along. Of course the reader understands full well that this was none other than Lettice Rodney, who was acting in accordance with the instructions she had received from the Duke. The black veil was over her head in such a manner as to conceal her hair and shade her features: but there was quite sufficient light in the passage for Amy to recognise the dress; and when the figure had passed, she retreated a few steps into the room.

"Now, Amy," murmured the Duke, in a deep hollow voice, as he also quitted the door and closed it,—"what say you?"

"I am afraid, my lord, that there can be no doubt of it," she responded. "But is your Grace sure that you beheld my mistress enter Mr. Stanhope's room?"

"Can I doubt my own eyes?" asked the Duke: "and does not that stealthiness of proceeding which you have just witnessed—does it not, I say, confirm all I have told you?"

"And now what will your Grace do?" inquired Amy, who was indeed all but convinced that the mistress whom she had hitherto believed the very pattern of virtue, purity, and frankness, was the personification of profligacy, viciousness, and hypocrisy.

"What will I do?" cried the Duke:—"what in heaven's name *can* I do?" he asked, with the air of one who was bewildered and distracted. "It is true that for some time past her Grace and myself have not been on the very best terms together; and I dare say that I have been looked upon as a cruel and hard-hearted husband who ill-treated his wife. But if the world only knew the infirmities of her temper——However, I need not trouble you with such explanations. You ask me what I will do; and you have counselled me to take no precipitate step——"

"And this advice, my lord, I respectfully but earnestly venture to repeat," said Amy Sutton.

"It shall be followed—rest assured that it shall be followed!" responded the Duke. "I will create no disturbance; whatever is to be done, shall be performed in a suitable and becoming manner. A divorce——this is the only course!"

"And yet, my lord," said Amy, "there is still the possibility of some mistake: for remember that I have not seen her Grace issue from Mr. Stanhope's chamber."

"True!" ejaculated the Duke, as if now struck by the fact for the first time. "I will do nothing rashly!—I will think over it! Do you return to your own room. I need not enjoin you to keep the dreadful affair secret until secresy becomes no longer possible. You are prudent and discreet. Ah! you advised me kindly; and kindness under such circumstances, must be rewarded. Take this purse——and remember, Amy, not a look nor a syllable to your mistress to-morrow to show that she is suspected! And now good night."

"Accept my thanks, my lord," said the lady's-maid, as she clutched the purse and her ear caught the chink of gold. "Good night."

She stole softly back to her own chamber; and a few minutes afterwards the Duke of Marchmont, in an equally stealthy manner, went down the private staircase, and rejoined Lettice,—who had found her way to the little room to which she was first introduced, and where a light had been left burning.

"Everything goes well," said Marchmont, with a look of triumph, as he poured her out another glass of champagne. "On Monday night you must repeat the performance. I will manage to run down to you between eight and nine o'clock, and tell you which particular dress you are to put on. And now farewell. I see that the business will be brought to a termination much more speedily than I had even dared hope or anticipate at first; and in a few days you will be enabled to return to London."

Lettice took her departure; and the Duke of Marchmont stole up to his own chamber, chuckling at the progress that was already made in the vile conspiracy against his innocent wife.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE POND.

According to the plan which he had in view, the Duke of Marchmont observed on the Monday evening what particular dress Lavinia wore; and he was inwardly delighted by the recollection that there was a duplicate thereof in the possession of Lettice at the farm-house. At about nine o'clock on this evening of which we are now writing, he rose from his chair in the drawing-room, where he was seated with the Duchess and the Hon. Wilson Stanhope; and complaining of a dreadful headache, said he should take a ramble through the grounds with the hope of dispelling it. But on issuing forth from the mansion, he made the best of his way to the farm-house—gave Lettice the requisite information with regard to the particular dress she was to put on—and then began to retrace his steps homeward.

The evening was very different from that of the Saturday when Lettice took her first trip on her nefarious mission to Oaklands. It was indeed just such an evening as that on which Christian had accompanied the Duke, to carry the box to the farm-house. It was dark and windy; and Marchmont drew his cloak more closely around him as he had to breast that gusty wind on his way back to the mansion. On nearing the pond, the surface of which gave forth a feeble shimmering light, he quickened his pace; but all in a moment he stopped short, and staggered as if about to fall, on beholding a dark form standing on the very spot where he had seen his murdered uncle's corpse on that memorable morning when the foul deed was first discovered by Purvis and Leachley. Yes unmistakably that form was there!—beyond all possibility of doubt it stood upon that spot, motionless as if it were a statue! The Duke of Marchmont stopped short, we say—and then staggered back a pace or two. A faintness came over him—he passed his hand over his eyes—he looked again—the form was no longer there: but he fancied that he caught a last glimpse of it as it moved farther round the pond, where it either melted into thin air, or was else lost in the deep black shade of the hedge and of the huge trunks of the trees.

"It was nothing!—mere imagination!" said Marchmont to himself, now with an almost superhuman effort recovering his self-possession: but he nevertheless hurried along, throwing quick furtive looks over his shoulder: and he felt not so strong in the conviction *that it was really nothing* as he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was. Indeed, for a few minutes he was almost staggered in his guilty design with regard to his wife. But when once he entered upon the grounds of Oaklands, he felt more courageous—more strong in his purposes of evil. The influence of the occurrence at the pond had worn off: for his mind was naturally of an iron hardihood; and even if a veritable shape from the dead had confronted him face to face, and laid its cold hand upon him, he was not the man to be deterred from any object which he had taken so much trouble to accomplish. And he endeavoured to confirm himself in his treacherous intents by reflecting that if a divorce were procured in respect to Lavinia, he might in due time conduct another bride to the altar—issue might spring from such new alliance—and the proud title which he bore, would not either perish with him, or descend upon some claimant who might rise up from a lower grade of society. And then, too, he hated his wife: her modest virtues and unassuming excellences were in reality gall and wormwood to his evil-disposed heart. In short, he had many motives for ridding himself of her.

"Yes—it was all imagination," he said to himself; "and I was a fool for hesitating in my purpose even for a single moment!"—with which reflection he re-entered the mansion.

Lettice set off from the farm-house at about eleven o'clock; and though the night was so dark and tempestuous, she experienced no circumstance to renew the alarm which she had felt on the previous occasion. She reached the private door of the mansion at half-past eleven, and was admitted by the Duke in the same way as before. A glass of champagne was at hand to cheer and warm her: the cloak and the bonnet were put off—the veil was adjusted over her head—and she was conducted by Marchmont to Mr. Stanhope's chamber.

A few minutes afterwards the Duke tapped at the door of Amy Sutton's room; and the lady's-maid—who had been prepared for such a summons, if circumstances should arise to render it expedient—came forth at once, she not having begun to disapparel herself. Silently did she follow his Grace down the stairs; and he led her to the close vicinity of Mr. Stanhope's chamber. Concealing themselves in a place which appeared the most convenient for the purpose of watching, they remained motionless and silent for some while. At length the door of that chamber opened; and Lettice Rodney stole forth,—purposely lingering, and appearing to be listening attentively, just within the sphere of light which glimmered forth from the interior of the room. For inasmuch as no stars nor moon were shining on this particular night, it would have been impossible for Amy Sutton to distinguish the dress worn by Lettice, if this plan had not been adopted. Thus the door was left open; and for a few moments did Lettice linger near it, in pursuance of instructions previously given to her by the Duke. She passed on—Stanhope closed the door of his chamber—and at the expiration of a minute, the Duke said to Amy in a low deep whisper, "What think you now?"

"It is impossible, my lord, to disbelieve one's own eyes," answered the lady's-maid.

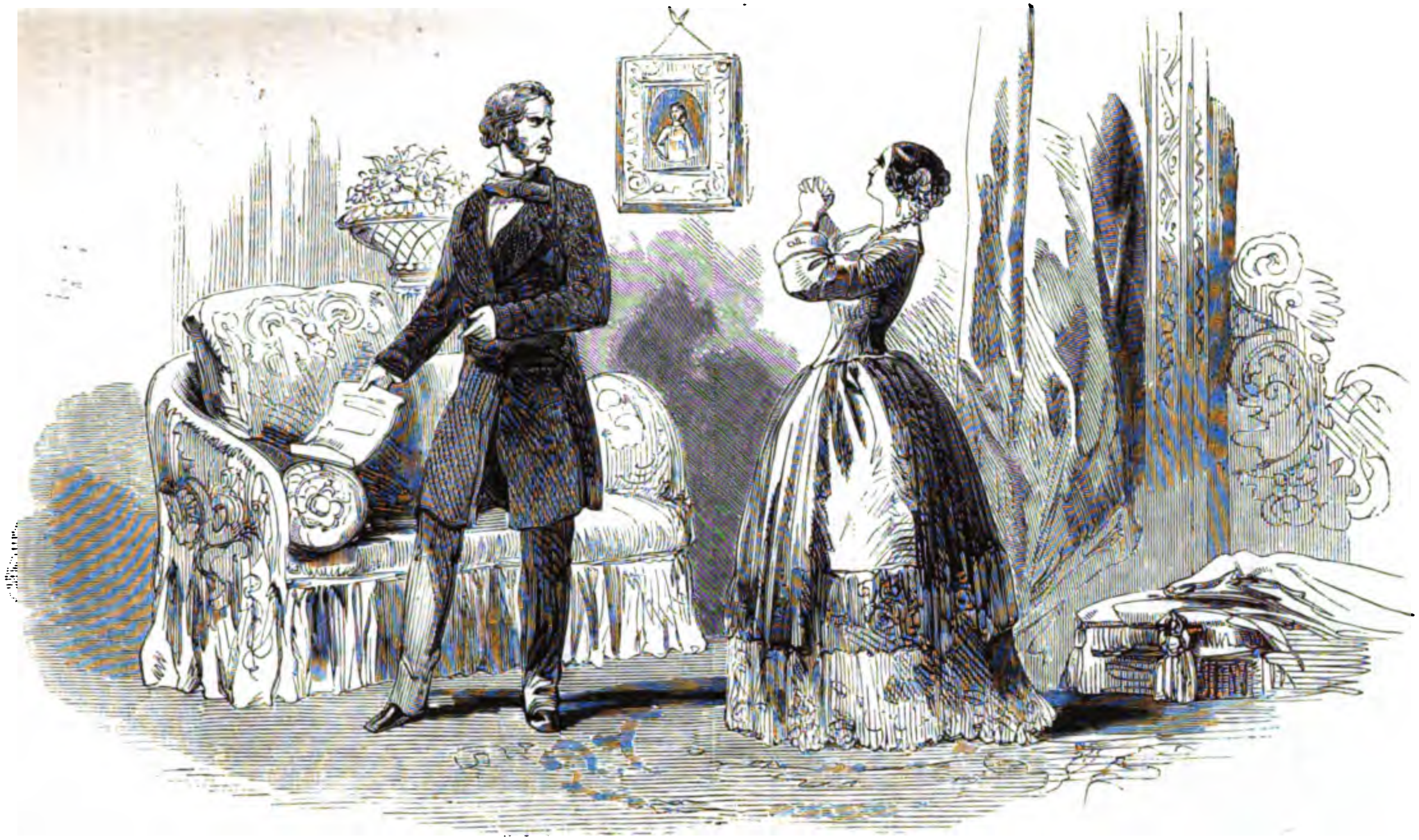
"Impossible indeed!" rejoined Marchmont. "Hasten you up to your own chamber—keep silence as heretofore—and here is a farther proof of my liberality."

Amy accepted the gold which was thrust into her hand; and she retraced her way to her room,—while Marchmont, at the expiration of a brief interval, descended to rejoin Lettice, who shortly afterwards issued forth from the private door of the mansion.

The darkness had deepened with the presence of midnight; and the wind had grown more tempestuous. Lettice Rodney drew her capacious mantle as closely around her as she could; and pressing on through the grounds, she entered upon the road. The moaning of the wind carried superstitious feelings into her soul. She felt that she had been assisting at a very criminal proceeding: for she comprehended full well that the ruin of an innocent lady was in contemplation. The effects of the champagne cheered her no longer: she was affrighted at the black turpitude wherein she was mixed up,—a turpitude as black as the darkness which surrounded her. It was the first time in her life she had ever experienced feelings so completely remorseful. She struggled against them—she endeavoured to cheer herself with the thought of the reward she had already received and of the farther proofs of Marchmont's liberality which she was yet to have: but these reflections failed now as a talisman to expel unpleasant thoughts from her imagination. She wished that she had not entered into this conspiracy. She was not so depraved that if it had been propounded to her all in a moment, she would have plunged headlong into it: but she had been gradually drawn in and enmeshed as it were in its trammels, till she had gone too far to retreat. The pitchy darkness of the night and the mournful moaning of the wind, filled her soul with images of terror.

How she wished that she had not to pass the pond! or that it was already passed! How glad she should be, she said to herself, when once more safe in her chamber at the farm-house! Marchmont had told her that she would not again have to visit Oaklands at night; and this was at least some consolation. But, Oh! how she wished that the remainder of the route was accomplished!

It was so dark that she could scarcely see her way; and thus her progress was slow—while ever



and anon the wind seemed to be speaking to her in human tones, as if reproaching her for the wickedness wherein she had played a part. And then, too, these sounds—at times when the wind sank somewhat—resembled the moans of murder borne upon the agitated air. Occasionally too she fancied that she heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind; and she shuddered at the thought of being seized upon by lurking robbers—shuddered too more deeply still at the reflection that this same road might possibly become the scene of another hideous tragedy—herself the victim! And ever and anon through the deep darkness, shapes—darker than that darkness—appeared to flit; so that there were moments when she shrank within herself—when she trembled to the very confines of her being—while she felt as if awful horror would turn her brain. Lavinia, thou wast already avenged somewhat, in the frightful sensations which this guilty creature experienced!

And now she knew by the turning in the road, that she was drawing close towards the pond; and her limbs appeared to fail her. Her knees knocked together—her teeth chattered: wildly did she seek with straining eyes to penetrate the darkness, and assure herself that there was no unearthly shape standing on that scene of murder. Vividly back to her mind came the incidents of her first night's walk to Oaklands,—when twice she fancied she beheld a dark shape—once disappearing from the midst of the road, and the second time on the opposite side of the hedge. Not for an instant could she *now* persuade herself that those were mere fancies, as she had hitherto succeeded in doing:—they were in her brain with all the awful horror of realities. With a mighty effort she strove to gather up the remnants of her shattered, scattered courage; and she somewhat succeeded as she drew close to the pond. The feeblest possible glimmer rested upon its surface: shudderingly she looked that way to see if any shape of terror intervened to break this glimmering: but there was none. Her courage rose somewhat higher: the pond was passed—she began to breathe more freely,—when she became aware that she was not alone—that there was some one by her side. A scream rang wildly forth from her lips; and she dropped as if a bullet had at the instant penetrated her heart.

As Lettice Rodney slowly came back to consciousness, she thought that she was awaking from a hideous, horrible dream: but a sense of awful numbing consternation came slowly and chillingly over her as she gradually became aware of her position. She was by the side of the pond, half supported in the arms of some one; and water had been sprinkled upon her countenance.

"You have nothing to fear," said the individual, whose voice sounded low and deep to the ears of the appalled Lettice.

"Who are you?—for God's sake tell me who are you!" she cried, starting up in a species of frenzy.

"I am a human being, as you are," was the response; "although a guilty conscience may smite you with the dreadful thought that I come from another world."

"And what would you with me?" inquired Lettice, all her fears now suddenly flowing into another channel, and suggesting the horrible thought that she was in the hands of a robber and assassin.

"I tell you that you have nothing to fear in the form of violence," answered the individual,—who, we may as well observe, was none other than Clement Redcliffe: "but it is necessary that we should have some little conversation together."

"Conversation?" said Lettice, wildly echoing the word: but so bewildered and lost in terror was she as to be at the moment unconscious of what she was saying. "Conversation—*here?*"

"Yes—here!" replied Redcliffe: "for this is a spot where the guilty conscience becomes too deeply appalled not to make such atonement as may be in its power. Compose yourself. I need not apologize for constraining you to linger yet a little while in the bleak night-air,—you who hesitate not to face it in order to pursue your path of mischief!"

"What mean you?" asked Lettice, almost in a dying tone: for she at once comprehended that allusion was thus made to the nefarious transactions in which she had been engaged.

Her terror was however so far abated, that she no longer apprehended violence on the part of him who was thus addressing her; and she endeavoured, through the darkness, to obtain some idea of his features. Indeed, the suspicion had stolen into her mind that his voice was not altogether unfamiliar to her—at least in its accents—though its deep solemn tone was different enough from the hilarious one he had forced himself to assume on the occasion of his visit to Madame Angelique's abode. But the collar of his cloak was drawn so high up over his countenance, and his hat was pulled so much forward, that Lettice was totally unable to discern his features. She saw that he was tall, and upright as a dart as he then held himself: but these circumstances afforded no clue to the establishment of an identity.

"You ask what I mean?—and in a few words I will explain myself," said Mr. Redcliffe, still purposely disguising his voice as much as possible, so as to pass undiscovered through the interview. "It has come to my knowledge—it matters not how—that you are engaged in the vilest and most abominable pursuit that a human being could possibly enter upon, short of such a deed as that which has rendered this very spot so awfully memorable. But it is a pursuit which becomes doubly atrocious when adopted by a female against another of her own sex. I am no stranger to the outlines of this most execrable conspiracy. At this very moment you wear beneath that cloak a dress which is the counterpart of one belonging to the Duchess of Marchmont. On Saturday night you paid your first visit to Oaklands. I watched you—I dogged your footsteps—as I have done this night again——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Lettice, as Redcliffe's words explained to her the mystery of that shape which she had seen, and which now after all proved to be a reality—though a reality devoid of the preternatural associations which at one time had seemed to belong thereto. "For heaven's sake, sir, tell me who you are, and what you mean to do with me? Do not—do not give me up to justice!—do not ruin me! I have been led into it—I have been drawn on!"—and the wretched creature clasped her hands together in wild, frenzied, shivering anguish.

"To that extent do I believe you," answered Redcliffe; "and if you do my bidding, you shall not be handed over to the grasp of justice."

"Oh, a thousand thanks for that assurance!" exclaimed Lettice, infinitely relieved. "But your bidding, sir—what is it?"

"Tell me truthfully, all that you have done within the walls of yon mansion," continued Redcliffe; "and beware how you attempt to deceive me. Indeed, the endeavour would be vain: for I know too much not to be enabled to discern in a moment whether the things you may relate correspond with and fit into the details wherewith I am already acquainted."

"Oh, believe me, sir, I will tell you truly!" exclaimed Lettice. "But you promise——"

"I am not a man who will fly from his pledge," interrupted Redcliffe. "And now proceed."

Lettice Rodney, more and more relieved by Redcliffe's assurances, at once made a full and complete confession of all that she had done, and the details of which are known to the reader. She concluded by an earnest entreaty that Redcliffe would save her as much as possible from exposure, and that he would also shield her against the anger of the Duke of Marchmont.

"I will do you no harm," he responded; "and as for the anger of the Duke of Marchmont, you surely can defy it. We will now walk away from this fearful spot. I am about to accompany you to the door of the farm-house where you are residing; and you will give me those dresses which were sent from London to serve the most diabolical of purposes. To-morrow, at an early hour, you would do well to leave the neighbourhood; and if the incidents of this night have produced any salutary effect upon your mind, I should counsel you to return not to that gilded den of infamy in London whence you came—but to study how to adopt a better course of life. There is one condition which I must impose; and this is that you mention not to the women at the farm-house what has occurred between yourself and me, and that you give them no explanation in respect to your motive for surrendering up the dresses. I need scarcely add that you are equally forbidden to communicate with the Duke of Marchmont; because you will not be so mad as to place yourself within the sphere of his vindictive rage."

While he was thus speaking, Clement Redcliffe conducted Lettice away from the vicinage of the pond; and they pursued the remainder of the short distance to the farm-house in silence. Having passed through the gate, Redcliffe broke that silence,—saying, "Have the goodness to make a parcel of the dresses in as compact a form as possible: I do not wish to take them in the box. I shall remain outside. Use despatch—bring them to me yourself—and see that you keep back not an article which originally came in that box. Beware how you deceive me!—for my pledge guaranteeing your impunity, holds good only so far as you execute my bidding honestly and truthfully."

Lettice promised to act as Mr. Redcliffe enjoined her: and he remained at the gate while she entered the house. In about a quarter of an hour she came forth again, with a bundle which she consigned to him. Again too did she endeavour to catch a glimpse of his countenance: but he was upon his guard in this respect: he did not choose to be recognised—and he felt confident that he was not. Still however floated through the mind of Lettice Rodney, the suspicion that the accents of his voice were not altogether unknown to her: but she could not for the life of her recollect where they had ever before sounded upon her ear.

"And now farewell," he said; "and may I hope that the incidents of to-night, together with the mercy which is shown you, will have the effect of leading you, Lettice Rodney, into other and better ways."

With these words, Clement Redcliffe hastened from the gate, and was immediately lost to the view of Lettice in the surrounding darkness. She re-entered the dwelling, half bewildered by all that had occurred, and even doubtful whether she were not in the midst of a dream.

The carrier's van which passed along the road on the following morning at nine o'clock, was stopped by Phœbe Norwood; and Lettice Rodney took her place therein, to be conveyed to the nearest town whence there was a coach for London. Whether she purposed to follow Mr. Redcliffe's advice and enter upon a new career—or whether she intended to return to Madame Angelique's—will transpire in a future chapter of this narrative.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE EXPLOSION.

At a still earlier hour than that on which the carrier's van was thus stopped, a note was delivered on that same morning at Oaklands, addressed to Christian Ashton; and the messenger who bore it —a labouring man—immediately departed without waiting to see if there were any response; in doing which he only followed out the instructions he had received, and for the faithful performance of which he had been liberally remunerated. The note was from Mr. Redcliffe, desiring Christian to come to him with the least possible delay.

It was a little after ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day, that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope suddenly ordered his valet to pack up his boxes and follow with them as speedily as he could by the first conveyance which could be obtained; and having issued these commands, Mr. Stanhope quitted the mansion on foot. He appeared to be much agitated; and the valet knew that the orders were given immediately after his master had been closeted for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont. The domestics too, who were lounging in the hall, were struck by Mr. Stanhope's appearance as he rapidly passed out of the mansion, and as he flung a bank-note to the lacquey who was nearest, bidding him divide the amount amongst the servants generally. Thus, in a very few minutes, it became known through the house that there was something wrong—though the only one of the domestics who had an insight into the matter, was Amy Sutton. She of course comprehended that the crisis had come and that the storm was now on the point of bursting above the head of her mistress. Of Lavinia's guilt she entertained not the slightest doubt:—how could she after all she had seen and heard? But still, with her habitual caution and cold reserve, she said nothing,—quietly awaiting the moment when she would be called upon to testify to all that had come to her knowledge, or until the tremendous truth (as she supposed it to be) should explode from another quarter.

At the time that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope was taking his departure in the manner just described, Lavinia was engaged in her own private sitting-room adjoining her bed-chamber. She was reading a book, and dreaming of no evil. All of a sudden the Duke entered the room; and she perceived in a moment that there was something wrong. He had tutored his looks to assume an air of ill-subdued rage; and walking straight up to her as she rose in affright from the sofa, he said, "Madam, you are faithless!"

"Good heavens, Hugh! what fearful misconception is this?" cried the startled Duchess, becoming pale as death.

"I repeat, madam," responded her husband sternly and vehemently, "you have violated your duties as a wife—you have dishonoured me!"

Now it was that the countenance of the Duchess became crimson with indignation—while her whole form trembled violently: and she exclaimed, "No, my lord! Never was accusation more foul—more false!"

"Every woman who is thus detected, speaks in a similar strain," retorted the Duke. "Here, madam, is one proof—and others have likewise come to my knowledge."

"Oh, this is going too far!" cried Lavinia, the tears gushing forth from her beautiful blue eyes, and her bosom heaving with convulsive violence.

"The proof, madam, I say!" thundered forth the Duke of Marchmont: and he produced a letter, which he hastily unfolded and displayed to her view.

"Whatever that letter may be, I know not," exclaimed the Duchess: and raising her clasped hands, she cried, "Heaven is my witness that I am innocent!"

"Innocent?" echoed Marchmont, forcing himself to look and to speak as if he were boiling with rage. "What! innocent in the face of such damning evidence as *this?* Besides, madam, your paramour has admitted his guilt. This letter, intended for your hands, but accidentally dropped by the villain who has dishonoured me——"

"Hugh," cried the Duchess, almost wild with mingled indignation, frenzy, and despair, "it is a horrible mistake—a frightful error! God is my witness that never by word or thought have I dishonoured you!"

"Ah! you dare persist in this impudent denial?" exclaimed the Duke. "Why, woman! here is the letter in which your paramour addresses you in the language of love—speaks of the favours you have bestowed upon him, and entreats their renewal!"

"Hugh, this is dreadful!" murmured the miserable Duchess, sinking upon the sofa, covering her face with her hands, and bursting forth into an agony of weeping.

"Oh, there are other proofs yet to come!" continued the Duke. "Since Saturday night has your frailty been known to me: but I have dissimulated—I have endeavoured to blind myself against my own convictions. Too merciful perhaps, and too confiding—or rather too slow to be convinced—I waited for other evidence—— And it is here—unmistakable, irrefutable, damning!"

As the Duke held forth the letter with one hand, he dashed the other against it while he thus spoke with every appearance of infuriate passion. Indeed, though having not the slightest legitimate ground, as the reader well knows, for the present proceeding, he had nevertheless literally lashed himself up into a rage. But he was for a moment somewhat staggered when the Duchess—suddenly becoming calm, and acquiring a degree of firmness at which even she herself was astonished—advanced up to him, and said, "I can look you in the face, Hugh, without blushing! This is a matter which cannot and must not be disposed of amidst a torrent of passion. I court and demand the completest investigation. There has been no circumstance in my life to justify so foul a calumny: there has never even been the faintest levity on my part to give colour to such an accusation.

"But this letter?" cried the Duke, holding it up before her.

"A letter might be found addressed to yourself," responded Lavinia, "and charging you with all conceivable iniquities: but it nevertheless would not prove your guilt."

"I tell you there are other proofs!" vociferated Marchmont: and he rang the bell violently.

The Duchess resumed her seat; and being now fortified with a calm dignity, as well as being upheld by the consciousness of her own innocence, she serenely awaited the next phase, whatsoever it might be, in this extraordinary drama. Not but that the whole proceeding was intensely painful for her:—still she felt certain that the issue must be in her favour, as she was very far from suspecting the dark villany plotted by her own husband.

As it was the bell of her Grace's private sitting-room which had been rung, it had to be answered by one of her female dependants; and it was Amy Sutton who in a few moments made her appearance. The first glance which the lady's-maid flung upon her mistress and the Duke, showed her that the explosion had taken place: but she was nevertheless somewhat amazed to perceive the comparatively calm and dignified look which Lavinia wore, and which bespoke outraged innocence far more than conscious guilt.

"Ah! it is you?" said the Duke, as Amy entered the room: "and it is fortunate—for you are the very person I at the moment wanted."

Now indeed the Duchess gave a half-start of surprise and curiosity; and then her regards settled upon Amy's countenance, to gather thence if possible what part she was about to play in the present proceedings. Pure-minded and kind-hearted as the Duchess herself was, she revolted against the idea which for an instant struck her that Amy could have been treacherously and wickedly calumniating her: but when she beheld a certain confusion almost amounting to distress in the young woman's look and manner, Lavinia was bewildered what to think.

"Amy Sutton," said the Duke, who now thought fit to speak in a more solemn and subdued tone than he had hitherto adopted. "I am well aware that it is unpleasant, and indeed afflicting for you——"

"Amy," interrupted the Duchess, advancing towards her maid, and looking her fixedly in the face; "if you have an accusation to make against me, it requires no preface. Speak out! Do you know aught to my disparagement?—have you ever——"

"I would much rather not have been called upon," said the young woman, who notwithstanding her constitutional coldness and indifference, was really embarrassed, confused, and distressed, "to give utterance to a word——"

"Ah! then you do know what is going on!" exclaimed the Duchess. "But speak! What have you to say? Hesitate not—fear not—but speak, I command you!"

"Would it not be better," inquired Amy, turning her troubled looks from one to the other, "if your Grace were to throw yourself upon his lordship's mercy——"

"Amy, this is an insult!" cried Lavinia, with all the dignity but distress of outraged innocence. "There is some horrible misconception! Proclaim it at once, that I may speedily refute it!"

"Alas, madam," said the young woman, who was amazed at the confidence with which the Duchess spoke, but yet could not do otherwise than attribute it to a bold hardihood,—"appearances are indeed so much against your Grace——"

"And those appearances?" demanded Lavinia, with mingled imperiousness and vehemence: so that the usually mild, gentle, and soft-speaking Duchess appeared quite another being in the eyes of her dependant.

"Speak out, Amy!" cried the Duke.

"If I must," resumed the lady's-maid, "it is my painful duty to declare that I saw your Grace issue from the chamber of Mr. Stanhope——"

"What?" cried the Duchess, the burning blush of indignation and outraged modesty in a moment suffusing her countenance; and then her looks in the space of the next half-dozen seconds indicated all possible varieties and transitions of excited feeling—astonishment and distress, anger and bewilderment, uncertainty and terror. "You dare say *that*, Amy? *You* to be guilty of such dreadful wickedness! It is false!—false as ever the vilest falsehood in this world could be!"

"It is true!" thundered the Duke: "for I myself beheld you with mine own eyes, as Amy herself did!"

"I repeat," cried the miserable Duchess, now again completely overwhelmed by the astounding nature of the charge,—"I repeat, and I call heaven to witness that it is false!"

"It is true—too true!" vociferated the Duke, stamping his foot violently upon the carpet.

"It is false!" exclaimed another person, who at this moment threw open the door and appeared upon the scene.

It was Christian Ashton.

The guilty Duke of Marchmont was for an instant staggered by the presence of his secretary, and by the bold denial which had issued from his lips. He was seized with perplexity and bewilderment; but quickly recovering his self-possession, he cast a rapid mental glance over whatsoever circumstances he thought there might be that could have induced the young man to proclaim himself the champion of Lavinia's innocence. What was there but the affair of the box?—and how could Christian possibly know what that box had contained?

"Begone, sir!" cried the Duke, fire flashing from his eyes. "How dare you intrude upon our privacy?"

"Because I have a duty to perform," responded our young hero, as he advanced into the room: and Marchmont was now struck by the fact that he carried a large parcel tied up in brown paper.

The reader may conceive the increased amazement of Amy Sutton at the new turn which the matter appeared to be taking; and he may likewise imagine the mingled hope and suspense which Lavinia felt from the same cause. Christian's mien and bearing were quite different from what they were wont to be. The natural gentleness of his looks had altered into a decisiveness which was almost stern: the retiring nature of the mild and unobtrusive youth had given place to the manly firmness of one who had a special part to perform and who was resolved to accomplish it. The Duke grew more and more apprehensive: a thousand vague fears racked him: the basis upon which his whole iniquitous proceeding was founded, seemed to be crumbling away,—while he was still utterly at a loss to conceive from what particular point the disruption was arising.

"I repeat," said Christian, quailing not for a single instant in the presence of his ducal employer, "the words I ere now uttered—that the accusation against the Duchess is false——yes, false as the heart of him who invented it!"

"Oh, yes, it is false!" cried Lavinia: "heaven knows it is false! But accuse not my husband, Mr. Ashton!—he himself must have been cruelly deceived by circumstances!"

"I wish I was enabled to confirm your Grace's assurance," responded our young hero: "but it is not in my power to do so. My lord, everything is known, and shall be boldly proclaimed if you provoke such an exposure. Suffer me to whisper one word in your ear."

"This is too impudent!" ejaculated the Duke, goaded almost to frenzy, and not knowing how to act.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, what have you said?" cried the Duchess, all the sources of her affliction becoming turned into a new channel. "It is impossible his Grace could have done this wilfully!——Oh, no! you wrong him—you wrong him, I can assure you!"

"I see that it becomes necessary for me to speak out," said Christian, with the same firmness of look, tone, and manner as before. "My lord, Lettice Rodney has confessed everything: and here are proofs——"

"Enough!" exclaimed the Duke, bounding forward to seize upon the parcel whence our young hero had just torn off the wrapper.

"Good heavens!" cried the Duchess: "my own dresses!"

"Ah!" said Amy Sutton, astounded at what she also thus beheld.

"No," cried Christian, "they are not your Grace's dresses: but they are counterparts—duplicates—the use and purport of which his lordship can but too well explain."

Amy Sutton hurried from the room, forgetting to close the door behind her; and the Duke, clutching Christian by the arm, whispered to him in a hoarse voice, "Not another word, I conjure you!"—then he instantaneously added aloud, "There is something extraordinary in all this: but it shall be investigated. Of course I at once admit——"

"What your Grace cannot deny, and never ought to have impugned," interrupted Christian boldly: "her Grace's innocence!"

"For heaven's sake," said the Duchess, who had hastened to close the door—of which opportunity her husband had availed himself to whisper that urgent adjuration in Christian's ear,—"for heaven's sake let this dreadful transaction be calmly and dispassionately explained!"

"Yes!" cried Amy Sutton, who now burst back again into the room, with a degree of excitement she had never before in her life displayed: "your Grace's dresses are safe in your own toilet-chamber! But these—the very same! or at least the closest resemblance!"—and she hastily inspected the contents of the parcel which Christian had thrown upon the table.

"Now hear me," said the Duke of Marchmont, whose countenance was deadly pale, and whose entire manner indicated the profoundest trouble of soul, notwithstanding the almost preterhuman efforts which he made to appear composed. "Solemnly in your presence, Christian Ashton—and in your's also, Amy Sutton—do I recognise and proclaim her Grace's innocence. Will this suffice? For a thousand reasons this affair must go no farther!"

"It is for her Grace to decide," said our hero.

The unfortunate Duchess could no longer blind her eyes to the fact that her own husband was at the bottom of a foul conspiracy of which she was to have been made the victim: but still she wished to spare him as much as possible; and she therefore unhesitatingly exclaimed, "Oh, no! let not the matter progress farther!"

"But I also must be consulted in this," said Amy Sutton, with that firmness which was characteristic of her. "I am dependent on my character for my bread," she continued, fixing her eyes upon the Duke; "and not for a moment must it be thought that I voluntarily or wilfully bore false evidence against her ladyship."

"I know enough of the circumstances," interposed Christian, "to be enabled to state that it is quite possible you have been grossly deceived, and that you fancied you beheld her Grace on particular occasions when it was in reality another. And now the uses to which these dresses have been put are perhaps fully understood——"

"Oh, enough! enough!" cried poor Lavinia, her looks recoiling from the haggard, ghastly, guilt-stricken countenance of her husband.

"Ah, I recollect!" suddenly exclaimed Amy, as a thought struck her. "That veil which was worn over the head of her whom your Grace pointed out!"—and she addressed herself to the Duke. "My lord, it was infamous of you!"

"For my sake, let no exposure take place!" murmured the Duchess, with appealing looks directed alike towards Amy and our hero. "I thank you, Mr. Ashton, for your kindness: your noble conduct never can be forgotten by me! And you, Amy—Oh, I do indeed acquit you of any evil intention! But I implore and beseech that nothing of all this shall be allowed to transpire. His Grace will treat me kindly in future——I forgive him!—from the bottom of my heart I forgive him! ——Tell me, Hugh, that henceforth——"

And drawing her husband aside, she concluded in a whisper her hurried prayer that his behaviour would change towards her, and in the future compensate for the past.

"It will indeed be better that this should go no farther," said Christian, availing himself of the opportunity thus to speak aside to Amy Sutton. "It is for the sake of the Duchess that I recommend secrecy. You stand acquitted of all wilful complicity in the odious affair. If there be exposure, a separation becomes inevitable between the Duke and his wife; and under such circumstances it is always unfortunate woman who suffers most!"

"For my part," responded Amy, "I have no wish to bring about such exposure, now that my own character is cleared."

Scarcely had the young woman thus spoken, when Marchmont, accosting Christian, said in an abrupt manner, "Come with me."

"Yes—go with his Grace," exclaimed the Duchess: "but again accept my most heartfelt gratitude!"—and she proffered the youth her hand, which he respectfully took.

He then followed Marchmont from the room,—Amy Sutton remaining with her mistress. The Duke led the way to another apartment; and the moment they entered it, he said to Christian, "You will keep silence in respect to this transaction?"

"It was not even my intention to proclaim so much," answered our hero, "if your lordship had suffered me to breathe a few words in your ear, which would have convinced you that everything was discovered."

"And how was it discovered?" inquired the Duke quickly. "Did you go and seek Lettice Rodney? did Madame Angelique betray anything when you called upon her to fetch the box?"

"My lord, it is useless thus to question me," answered Christian: "I am resolved to give no explanations. Suffice it for your Grace to have received unmistakable evidence that everything is completely known to me. And now——"

"But you must tell me!" cried Marchmont vehemently. "I cannot remain in this state of doubt and uncertainty: I must know where the treachery has been!"

"Treachery, my lord!"—and Christian's tone expressed a withering sarcasm. "But I repeat, it is useless for your Grace to question me: I will explain nothing."

"One word?" said the bewildered Duke: "only one word, I beseech you? Was it Stanhope himself——"

"No, my lord. I will tell you this much—that the villain Mr. Stanhope went away in ignorance of all that was to take place. But beyond this I shall say nothing more. I am now about to take my departure; and I request from your Grace a certificate of good conduct."

But Marchmont heard not the youth's last words: he had begun to pace the apartment in an agitated manner. The mystery which enveloped Christian's proceedings troubled his guilty mind. From what source could the exposure of the plot have possibly come first of all?—how was it that Lettice Rodney had been either persuaded or forced to surrender up the dresses? These were the questions which the Duke asked himself, and the solution of which he burnt to arrive at.

"My lord," said our hero, "under existing circumstances I cannot remain another hour in your Grace's employment. But inasmuch as I do not wish to stand the chance of your Grace subsequently speaking ill of me behind my back, I repeat my request for a certificate of good conduct."

"Ah! a certificate of good conduct?"—and for a moment Marchmont was inclined to treat the demand with scornful contempt: but a second thought restrained him; for he felt that his character was so completely at the mercy of the young man, he dared not convert him into an open and avowed enemy.

Biting his lip to keep down the feelings of rage and hate, and the threats of vengeance, which were seeking a vent, Marchmont placed himself at a table where there were writing-materials, and penned a few lines favourable to the character and qualifications of Christian Ashton. It cost him a painful effort indeed to complete the task, brief though it were; and when he had finished it, he could not help tossing the paper across the table with an ungraciousness that was almost brutal. But Christian—with a becoming dignity, which on the part of the obscure and humble youth contrasted strongly with the mean, petty, and ill-concealed spite of the great and powerful nobleman—took up the document, read it, deliberately folded it, and placed it in his pocket. Then, with a slight and distant bow, he was on the point of quitting the room,—when Marchmont exclaimed, "Ah! by the bye, there is a trifle of salary due to you for the short time you have been with me——"

But as he spoke in a supercilious tone which he could not possibly control, so strong were his infuriate feelings against the young man, the latter waited to hear no more—but left the apartment. Ascending to his chamber, he speedily packed up his trunk, and then hastened to take leave of the steward, whom he found in his own room.

"What! you are going Mr. Ashton?" said Purvis, seized with astonishment at the intelligence. "I hope nothing unpleasant has occurred?"

"You can judge for yourself, my good friend," responded Christian, "whether I am discharged through any misconduct of my own:"—and he displayed the certificate.

Purvis read it; and as he gave it back with a brightening look, he said, "Well, Mr. Ashton, though I am sorry you are going to leave us, yet on the other hand I am glad it is under no circumstances which may prejudice your future prospects. Farewell!—my best wishes attend you. I had hoped that we should have enjoyed many a pleasant ramble and chat together: but it seems otherwise destined. Farewell!"

The old man shook Christian's hand warmly again and again ere he suffered him to depart. Our young hero was issuing from the mansion, when he was accosted by Amy, who drew him aside and said, "Are you going to leave?"

"Yes—immediately," was the reply.

"Ah! her Grace thought that it would be so," resumed Amy. "But is it of your own accord?"

"Entirely," anwered Christian. "After everything that has occurred, I could not possibly remain in the Duke's service. It is very different for you, inasmuch as you are attached to her Grace."

"The Duchess desired me to present you with this," said Amy, "hoping that you will not refuse to accept it as a token of her gratitude:"—and she placed a heavy purse in our hero's hand.

"Oh, no! no!" exclaimed Christian: "such a service as I was enabled to render her Grace, is sufficiently repaid by the grateful feeling it engenders, and is not to be remunerated by gold. Convey my sincerest thanks to her Grace; and God grant that she may be happy! Farewell, Amy."

Thus speaking, Christian hurried away from the mansion,—one of the inferior male domestics carrying his box for him as far as the porter's lodge, where he left it with the intimation that he would send some one in the course of the day to fetch it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SCHOOLMASTER.

CHRISTIAN proceeded straight to the lonely cottage where Mr. Redcliffe had taken up his temporary quarters, and where he found that gentleman awaiting his return. He communicated everything that had occurred at Oaklands; and Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention.

"You have acted precisely in accordance with my instructions," observed Redcliffe, when Christian had brought his narrative to a conclusion, "and your own conduct in the matter deserves the utmost praise. You have lost your situation, and another must be procured for you. Cheerfully would I have you henceforth to live altogether with me, my young friend: but there are several reasons which compel me to deny myself that pleasure;—and in respect to them will I deal frankly with you. In the first place I could give you no employment; and idleness for a youth of your age, even with your excellent principles and with your naturally good disposition, would be very disadvantageous—I might almost say pernicious. Besides, you yourself, with such principles and with such a disposition, would I am sure infinitely prefer to eat the bread of your own honest industry than to subsist upon the resources of another. In the second place I myself, Christian, am no companion for one of your age: I am a lonely and unhappy man—my habits are peculiar—there are times when I smart under the sense of such wrongs——But I will not inflict aught of all this upon you. Suffice it to say that I have certain aims to work out, which do not altogether leave me the master of my own time nor of my own actions. And then too solitude is the necessary portion of such a one as I am; and I dare not have it broken by the companionship of another. Therefore, my young friend, we must part again; and you must go forth into the world to pursue your own career. That certificate of character which you have obtained, together with your manners, your appearance, and your qualifications, will enable you speedily to procure another post similar to that which you have this day resigned. You will return to London without delay: I know that you are anxious to see your sister. Take a respectable lodging until you obtain fresh employment. Here are ample funds for your immediate wants. But do not think, Christian, that in thus parting from you, I cease to be your friend or your well-wisher. No—I shall ever be anxious concerning you. You must visit me occasionally; and whenever you need the assistance or the counsel of friendship, be sure to come to me. My purse shall always be open to you; for I am well aware that you will never abuse the license I thus give you. And fail not to acquaint me with the place of your abode at all times, so that if you come not to me as often as I could wish, I may know whither to send an invitation."

Mr. Redcliffe placed a purse containing fifty guineas in Christian's hand; and the old man of the cottage, who had been sent to the porter's lodge to fetch the trunk, having by this time returned, our hero took a grateful leave of Mr. Redcliffe, and departed. He proceeded to a neighbouring village,—the old man following with the trunk; and there he was presently taken up by a stage-coach proceeding to London. On arriving in the metropolis, Christian left his luggage at the coach-office and hastened away to see his sister. The meeting between the twins was of characteristic warmth and affection, although they had only been a week separated. Christian acquainted his sister with all that had occurred at Oaklands; and the pure artless mind of the young girl was shocked at the infamous conduct of the Duke of Marchmont. Her brother however enjoined her not to repeat a syllable of the tale to Lady Octavian Meredith; and after an agreeable hour or two spent together, he took his departure.

It was now late in the evening; and Christian determined to pass the night at an hotel and look out the next morning for a lodging,—his purpose being to reside in such temporary quarters until he could obtain another situation through the medium of advertisements inserted in the daily newspapers. Accordingly, after breakfast in the morning, our young hero issued forth; and after wandering some little while amongst the streets at the West End, he presently found himself threading that one in which dwelt Mr. Chubb the parish clerk. Was it accident that brought Christian thither? or was it a scarcely comprehended and unacknowledged feeling of interest and of love on behalf of the young creature of ravishing beauty whom ten days back he had seen for a few minutes at that house? The reader's imagination can so easily solve the query which we have put, that it becomes unnecessary for us to explain it in set and formal terms. But on passing the house, and casting a look up at the windows, how sudden a thrill galvanised our hero when he perceived a card announcing apartments to let!

Christian stopped short, and looked at the card again. Yes—there were the words, in a bold round schoolmaster's hand, embellished with all manner of flourishes and caligraphic illustrations. Christian was more than half inclined to knock at the door: but a sudden sensation of timidity restrained him—and he passed slowly along the street. But he did not leave the street: no—he turned, retraced his way towards the house, looked at the card again, and was again about to knock at the door, when the thought struck him that the apartments might be if not exactly above his means, at least above the sum which he was justified in paying for a lodging; and that therefore if he did make an inquiry and then decline, it might be set down to impertinent curiosity or else as an excuse to obtain a glimpse of the lovely Miss Vincent. This latter reflection, as it swept through Christian's mind, sent all the blood up into his countenance: for he felt as bashful as the very young girl whose image was uppermost in his thoughts. So again he passed on—but this time to the other extremity of the street: and yet he could not tear himself away from it.

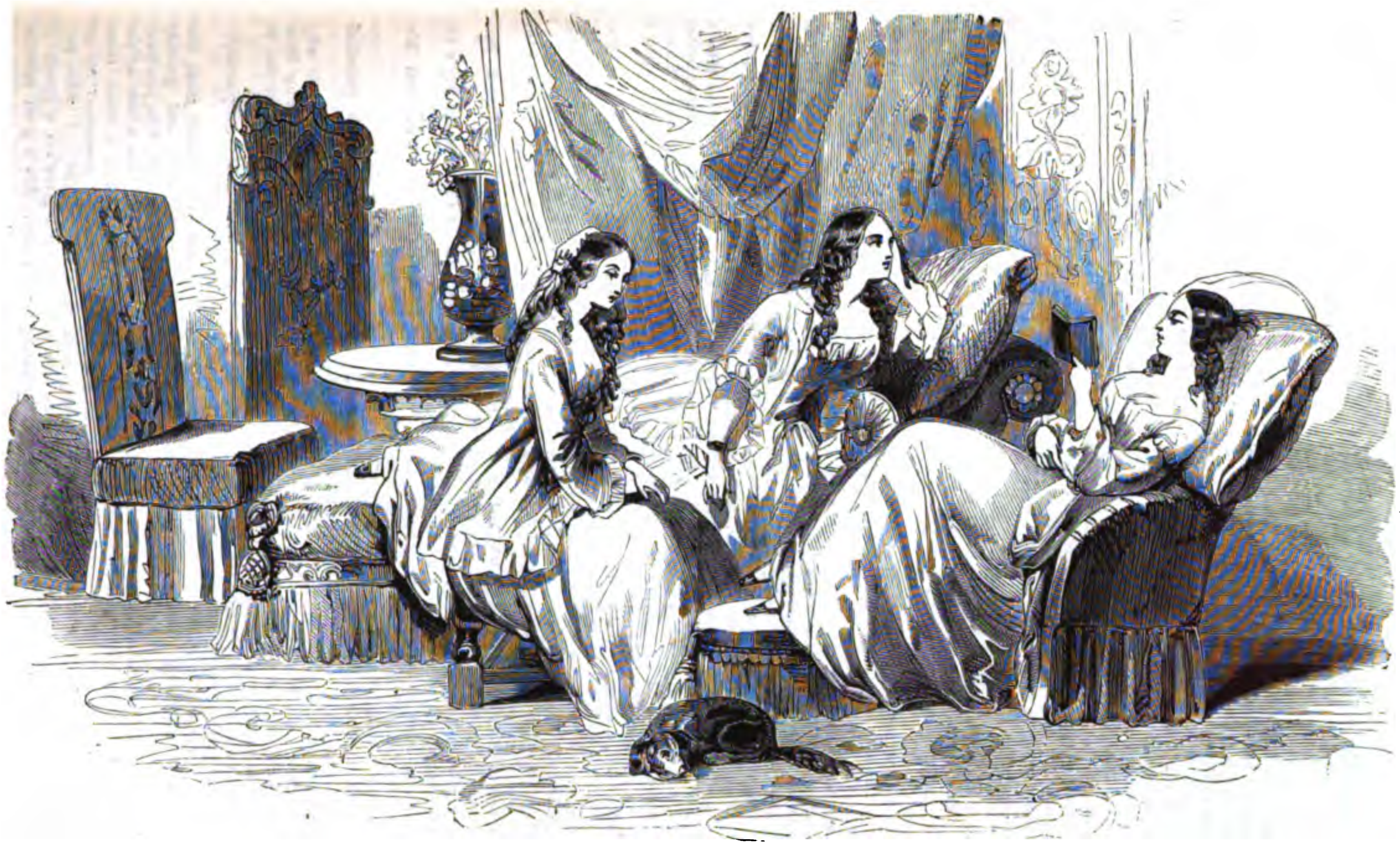
"After all," he thought, "there is no harm in making the inquiry:"—and he retraced his way.

At the same moment that his vision was once more turned upon the card in the ground-floor window, it encountered the vixenish eyes of Mrs. Chubb who was looking over it. He bowed: she did not seem to recognise him, nor to comprehend whether the salutation were really meant for herself or not. But now, with a sudden access of intrepidity, Christian ascended the steps and knocked boldly at the front door. Mrs. Chubb's vixenish face disappeared from the window; and her lean gawky form instantaneously appeared at the door. She was dressed in a faded and dirty cotton gown, with an old shawl thrown over her shoulders, and a rusty black crape cap with dingy and crumpled red ribands upon her head. For a moment she surveyed our hero with the air of one who strives to bring forth a reminiscence from dimness and obscurity; and then suddenly recollecting him, she said with a very sour look, "Oh! you are the young gentleman who brought my husband home t'other night when he was the wuss for liquor? I suppose you've come to call upon him: but he's engaged in school."

"No," responded Christian; "I took the liberty of knocking at your door in consequence of seeing that card in the window."

"Ah! that's different," said Mrs. Chubb: and her looks suddenly became different also. "If you're in want of decent and respectable lodgings, sir, you can have 'em here—leastways if we suit each other. It's on'y a small parlour and bedroom—which is fifteen shillings a week with attendance."

Christian had fifty pounds in his pocket; and he thought to himself that in a week, or a fortnight at the outside, he might obtain another situation—so that it would not be unreasonable on his part to take Mrs. Chubb's lodging. He walked in, and she showed him the parlour of which she had spoken, and which was indeed small enough, it being a third room on the ground-floor,—the one little window of which looked into the yard, commanding a view of the water-butt and the dust-hole, a pail and a mop, together with two specimens of animated nature—one being in the shape f a cat that was sitting blinking on the wall, and



the other in the form of a slatternly servant-girl who was peeling potatoes and whose wages might at the first guess be put down at eighteenpence a week. The bed-chamber was above this little parlour, and of corresponding size. The rooms were however cleanly enough; and Christian speedily intimated his desire to become their occupant. He took out his purse to pay the rent in advance: but Mrs. Chubb, who was a woman that expressed her thoughts without the slightest circumlocution or disguise, declared "that she never took nobody without a reference; for though a lodger might be able to pay money, it was not always a proof of respectability."

Thereupon our hero immediately mentioned the name of Mrs. Macaulay,—upon hearing which Mrs. Chubb was reminded that Christian was a guest at that lady's house on the memorable night when he conducted her husband home; and this was a sufficient guarantee that he must be well known to Mrs. Macaulay aforesaid.

"Well," she observed, "the reference will do, sir: indeed there is no call whatsumever to take it. You can pay the week in advance; and if you come this way, Mr. Chubb will give you a receipt."

Christian accordingly followed Mrs. Chubb across the yard; and she opened the door of the schoolroom,—the boys' entrance to which was in the next street. It was a small, ill-ventilated place—excessively dirty—and the atmosphere so close and unpleasantly hot that Christian stopped short on the threshold. There a most edifying sight burst upon his view. At a desk sat Mr. Chubb, in an old dressing-gown, the pattern of which, before it was faded and soiled, had been a blue ground with black stripes: his feet were thrust into slippers, down at the heels; and as he was in the middle of hearing a class, he held a swingeing cane in his right hand. Suspended to a nail in the wall against which he sat, a huge birch had a most ominous appearance,—enough to provoke a tingling sensation on the part of the urchins who contemplated it. There might be altogether about forty scholars packed in this stifling place, and averaging from five to ten years of age.

When the door opened, Mr. Chubb looked slowly and solemnly towards it: for he always maintained a very grave and dignified bearing in the presence of his scholars—never giving way to any excitement except when he used the cane or applied the birch; and these he inflicted in the manner in which rowers are sometimes urged by the steersmen to "give way"—namely, "with a will." Mr. Chubb therefore, preserving his wonted solemnity, merely bestowed a bow upon Christian, and went on hearing the class. Mrs. Chubb did not immediately interrupt him: for she was doubtless anxious to impress our young hero with the wonderful discipline which prevailed in the school, the admirable educational qualifications possessed by her husband, and the marvellous brilliancy of the intellects which were expanding under such luminous tuition.

"It's the third class he's a-hearin' of," whispered Mrs. Chubb to Christian; "and they're all little 'uns, you see."

Christian looked as if he thought the sight a very interesting one. Perhaps there was the dimly floating idea in his mind of conciliating Mrs. Chubb, so as to be invited into her own parlour, where he might expect to see the beautiful Miss Vincent.

"Now then, Bill Shadbolt," said Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell pig?"

"P—i—double g, please sir," was the response.

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, how do you describe it?"

"A hanimal, please sir."

"Very good. Next boy, Ben Tidleywink—what's a pig—biped or quadrooped?"

"Biped, please sir."

"No, he ain't," said Mr. Chubb, with an awful frown and a sterner clutching of the cane, which perhaps he would have used but for Christian's presence. "Guess again."

"Oh! quadrooped, sir."

"To be sure. Very good, boy. Quadrooped, 'cause why he walks on four legs and has got a tail. Cut off his tail and he loses his dignity. It's just the same as taking a cocked hat and laced cloak away from a beadle; he sinks down into the commonest humanity. Now then third boy, George Snuffkin. What have you got to tell me about a pig?"

"Hamphiberous, please sir."

"Very good. And why is he amphiberous?"

"'Cause why, sir, he lives on solids and fluids."

"To be sure—meal and water makes his wash. But what else is he?"

"Graminivorous, please sir," was George Snuffkin's intelligent answer.

"And so he is. But explain."

"'Cause why, sir, he don't mind having green stuff and wegetables in his wash."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now take a lesson, boys, from the pig, and tutor your appetites to eat whatsomever comes in your way. That's the example I like to set the young idear when I teach it how to shoot."

Christian thought, as he recollected Mrs. Macaulay's party, that Mr. Chubb might have added without the slightest exaggeration that he could drink likewise anything that came in his way: but of course he gave not verbal utterance to the reflection.

"Now then, Joe Brinksby," continued Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell cat?"

"C—a—double t, please sir," was the boy's response.

"Of what genius is the cat?" inquired Mr. Chubb.

"The mouser genius, please sir."

"Very good. And what is there pecooliar about that beautiful domestic animal?"

"They can see in the dark, sir—'cause why they are full of electricity, which runs up from the tip of the tail to the head and comes out at the eyes."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb, complacently. "Third class may stand down."

And as the boys went back to their seats, the schoolmaster rose from his own; and gravely shaking hands with Christian, said, "So you have come to give me a call and have a look at the school? You see, Mr. Ashton, I teach these young members of the rising generation nat'ral history along with their spellin'. It kills two birds with one stone, and gives 'em a power of concentrating their idears. It's a good system, and is making its way as fast as steam-ingins and electric tilligrafs."

"I dare say Mr. Ashton is very glad to have an opportunity of seeing the school," said Mrs. Chubb: "but he didn't come for that all the same. He's took our lodgings: so you'll just write him out a receipt for the fust week, which he has paid in adwance."

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb: and reseating himself at the desk, he nibbed a pen—held it up to the light to assure himself that it was properly mended—and in a true schoolmaster fashion wrote the receipt in round hand, covering all the spare part of the slip of paper with the most extraordinary flourishes, and winding up the achievement with some curious illustration under his own name,—which said illustration might either be taken for the feather end of a quill, or else as an ingenious representation of that very cat's tail along which the electricity had been described as passing. Having leant back in his seat for a few moments, to admire the general effect of the receipt, Mr. Chubb gravely dried it on his blotting-paper, and handed it to Christian.

"That's the way," he said, pointing with his pen to the writing, "that I teach the boys to make their up-strokes and their down-strokes. But you shall see:"—then raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Now then, first class, with your copy-books!"

This command was followed by a bustling about on the part of some dozen of the scholars; and then ensued a rush of the same interesting youths in corduroys and pinafores, up to the desk. Mr. Chubb examined the copy-books one after another, passing them as he did so to Christian, and looking very hard in his face to observe the effect produced by these elegant specimens of juvenile caligraphy. Of course Christian admired everything thus submitted to him, and expressed himself so well pleased with Mr. Chubb's scholars that he begged to be allowed to place five shillings in the schoolmaster's hands, to be expended on whatsoever refreshments the juveniles might fancy and which the nearest pastrycook could supply. It must be again confessed that there was a little artifice in all this—though venial and natural enough: for, as we have before said, the youth was desirous to obtain Mrs. Chubb's good opinion, in the hope that it would facilitate the realization of his desire to see Miss Vincent. Nor was he disappointed: for Mrs. Chubb requested the pleasure of his company to tea in the evening.

He was speedily installed in his lodgings; and having drawn up an advertisement for the situation of private secretary to a nobleman, member of parliament, or any other person requiring such a functionary, he sallied forth to take it to the office of the *Times*. Returning home again, he dined; and with some books whiled away the hours until six in the evening,—when, having studied his toilet with an unusual degree of nicety, he repaired to Mrs. Chubb's parlour. As Christian opened the door, he could scarcely conceal the joy which thrilled through him, on beholding the lovely creature who had inspired him with so deep an interest.

Isabella Vincent was, as we have previously said, sixteen years of age; and it was no wonder that her exquisite beauty should have made an impression upon the heart of Christian Ashton. She was tall and slender, with a sylphid symmetry of shape that was at once gracile and elegant: for her's was that sweet age, when, with perhaps a slight precocity, the delicate outlines of girlhood's form were softly rounding and gently developing into the more flowing ones of approaching womanhood. All these outlines indicated a justness of proportions which, while constituting her form the rarest model of expanding beauty, seemed to fulfil the idea which the sculptors of old sought to express and work out in their Parian effigies. Its willowy elasticity and youthful grace—its slenderness of waist and softly budding contours of bust—its sloping shoulders and gently arching neck—its rounded arms and its straightness of limbs—its exquisitely modelled hands and sculptured perfection of ankles and of feet,—all combined to render Isabella's form the very incarnation of those rules of art which swayed the chisel or the pencil of the greatest masters when seeking to pourtray woman, in her loveliest form, through the medium of the marble or of the canvass.

As for her countenance,—to gaze thereon, it was not so much the perfect oval of that sweet face—nor the faultless regularity of the features—nor the deep blue eyes, so large and clear, with their thickly fringed lids—nor the classically pencilled brows, set upon the opals of the stainless forehead—nor the well-cut lips of coral redness—nor the teeth of orient pearls which shone between—nor the transparency of the complexion, with the softest tint of the rose upon the cheeks—nor the rich abundance of glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders,—it was not all this assemblage of charms which would most ravish and enchant the mind of the observer. But there was something in the sweet pensiveness and the holy melancholy, so to speak, of Isabella's countenance which constituted the pure virginal charm that appealed to the sentiment and not to the sense, and which had to do with the soul as much as with the heart of the beholder,—a charm which no eye could fail to perceive, the influence of which no mind could help acknowledging, and yet which only the imagination could comprehend inasmuch as no pen can describe it. Indeed, it was what the perfume is to the rose,—an essence apart from the beauty which attracts the eye: it was what the halo is to the angel,—a light distinct from the heavenly beauty of the form itself. It was the inexpressible charm which makes one think, while gazing on such a face, that the soul itself is unveiling its own loveliness and looking out in a soft sweet pensiveness.

Christian Ashton—with his refined intelligence, and with his feelings of unwarped delicacy—was the very one to appreciate the beauty of such a being as Isabella Vincent. To mere physical charms he would perhaps have remained long insensible: but here was mental and moral beauty—the beauty of the soul—mingling with loveliness of form and features in a manner which he had never seen before, save in respect to his own sweet sister Christina. The love with which Isabella had already inspired him—though heaven knows how unconsciously on *her* part and how as yet incompletely comprehended on *his own*—was not the mere every-day passion to which the name is so erroneously applied, or which of its own accord usurps the denomination: but it was that love which has something so œsthetic in its nature—so ethereal in its essence—so sublimated in its contexture, that it can be explained in no terms falling short of those which would depict it as the lost elysium of the soul—the veritable paradise of feeling whose sense died out of the hearts of our first parents at the same time that the spell of their immortality was broken.

Christian could not understand the footing on which Miss Vincent was dwelling beneath the Chubbs' roof. She was treated with more or less respect, especially by Mr. Chubb, who invariably called her "Miss" when he spoke to her: and it was only when Mrs. Chubb was in an ill-humour about anything, that she addressed herself in rather irritable terms to the young lady—as indeed she was wont to do towards any one else who came in her way. Christian did not therefore think that Isabella was living there in the light of a dependant: the only conjecture he could form, was that she paid for her board and lodging, though not to an amount which rendered the Chubbs so extremely anxious to keep her that their civility became downright servile. In her manner she was diffident and retiring, but not actually reserved—much less awkward or embarrassed: she spoke but little—yet when she did speak, it was with a mild and lady-like affability. Her voice was singularly sweet and melodious, with a tinge of plaintiveness in its tones: her language was well chosen—her remarks were characterized by intelligence. That she had been well educated, was evident,—as likewise that she was well-bred and well brought up; and all the usages of good society were familiar to her. How came she, then, in her present position?—had she no relatives to take charge of her—no friends of a better order than those in whose care Christian found her? All these were mysteries which he could not penetrate, and concerning which he dared scarcely ask on the next occasion that he found himself alone with either Mr. or Mrs. Chubb.

Four or five days passed; and Christian occasionally met the beautiful Isabella upon the stairs. She always responded to his passing remarks with that mild affability which we have just noticed: but he found no opportunity to lead her into a protracted conversation. She never stirred out of the house except when accompanied by Mrs. Chubb:—for the greater part of the day she kept her own chamber: sometimes she sat in the front parlour down stairs—and was then for the most part occupied in reading or working. Christian felt assured that she was not happy, though she might endeavour to resign herself to her lot. He was also convinced that there must be some strange mystery with regard to this beautiful creature; and he longed to fathom it,—not through any impertinent curiosity, but because he had become so deeply interested in her—so profoundly enamoured of her! She was a lovely myth; and often and often did Christian catch himself sighing: occasionally too did a tear trickle down his cheeks as he said to himself, "She is not happy; and it is not given to me to insure her felicity. Oh, to obtain her confidence, and to be permitted to breathe the language of solace and sympathy in her ears!"

The week was passing away; and Christian had received no answer to his advertisement. He endeavoured to make himself believe that he was sorry for this delay in obtaining another situation: but it was not so easy to arrive with conscientiousness at that belief. Indeed, if the truth be told, we think it must be admitted that Christian was rather glad than otherwise at having an excuse for prolonging his residence beneath the same roof which sheltered the object of his growing love. When he saw his sister he spoke to her about Isabella Vincent; and he asked Christina if she would come and call upon the young lady, provided the latter would consent to receive the visit? Christina, as the reader is aware, was always ready to do anything that lay in her power to serve her brother or to please him; and she cheerfully responded in the affirmative.

"Now," thought Christian to himself, "there will be an opportunity of cultivating a better acquaintance with the charming but mysterious Isabella!"

Accordingly, in the afternoon of that very same day on which he had thus spoken to his sister, our young hero proceeded to the Chubbs' parlour at a moment when he knew that Miss Vincent was there alone. He knocked at the door: her sweet voice bade him enter; and it struck him that the soft tint of the rose deepened slightly upon her cheeks when her eyes encountered his own. The usual compliments were exchanged; and then Christian, mustering up all his courage, said to the young lady, "I hope you will not think I am taking a very great liberty——but—but—I have spoken of you to my sister, who lives with Lady Octavian Meredith——Christina is a sweet amiable girl—and if you will grant your assent, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to introduce her to you."

The transitions of Isabella's beautiful countenance expressed a variety of feelings as our hero thus addressed her; and it was the fear of either giving offence, or of proposing something which was unwelcome, that made him hesitate as he had done. For an instant there was gratitude depicted in Isabella's look: then it changed into mournfulness: then she flung a quick glance towards the door, as if fearful that this conversation might be overheard: then she turned her eyes again on Christian with a saddening gaze; and then she bent them downward—and he thought that the faintest, gentlest sound of a subdued sigh was wafted to his ears.

"Christina," he said, hesitatingly and tremulously, "would be rejoiced to visit you and to form your acquaintance."

"I take it as very kindly meant, Mr. Ashton," answered Isabella, whose accents were likewise tremulous, notwithstanding her visible endeavours to speak firmly and to hide whatsoever emotions were struggling in her bosom. "Indeed, I feel grateful——but—but"——and here she again glanced towards the door—"I am not allowed to receive any visits, nor to form any friendships."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Christian, astonished and indignant: "are you the victim of a tyranny so stern as this?"

"Hush! for heaven's sake, hush!" said Isabella, glancing with renewed apprehension towards the door: and then, as if no longer able to restrain the emotions which were agitating within, she burst into tears.

"Good God, that I should have made you weep!" cried Christian: and in the excitement, the confusion, and the hurry of his own thoughts and feelings, he seized her small fair hand.

It was however instantaneously withdrawn—but not in anger; for the beauteous Isabella flung upon him, through the dimness of her tears, a look which eloquently proclaimed that she comprehended all his generous sympathy and was grateful for it. Then hastily wiping away those tears, she hurried from the room. At the same moment there was a double knock at the door; and Christian retraced his way to his own room.

He was in the midst of painful and bewildering conjectures as to the nature of that mystery which enveloped the lovely Isabella, and which seemed to be associated with so much cruel coercion and unnatural tyranny,—when the trull of a servant-girl knocked at his door, and throwing it open, said, "Here's a genelman which wants you, Mr. Ashton: and this is his card."

Our hero took the card, and found that it represented the aristocratic though perhaps not very euphonious name of the Chevalier Gumbinnen. The owner of this name had been left standing in the passage by the maid-of-all-work; and Christian, on hurrying forth, was horrified to perceive a mop on his visitor's right hand, and a pail of dirty water under his very nose. He flung a hasty reproach at the girl, and began confounding himself in excuses to the Chevalier,—who received them all with a sedate silence and a sort of inane mystification of look—which indeed was by no means astonishing, when it comes to be considered that the Chevalier Gumbinnen understood not a syllable of English. Christian hastily led the way into his own sitting-room—handed the Chevalier a chair—and awaited explanations, although he had no doubt in his own mind that the visit bore reference to the advertisement in the newspaper.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen was a little man, with a somewhat dirty look. He had very red hair, huge moustaches, and small eyes of pinkish blue. There certainly was nothing aristocratic in his appearance, whatever there might be in his name: neither was there any particular freshness in his costume. On the contrary, it seemed a little the worse for wear. It consisted of a blue dress coat with a stand-up collar: it was cut round in front, and thus sloped away into the tails: it had a great deal of black braiding about it, and was worn unbuttoned. The waistcoat was white—or rather had been a week back when it first came home from the wash: but it was evident that this article, as well as the Chevalier's shirt, had not been put on clean in the morning of that particular day. His pantaloons were black, with long stripes of braiding: his hat was of singular shape, and somewhat deficient in nap. He wore a profusion of jewellery, which looked very well at the first glance, but perhaps would not have borne the close inspection of a *connoisseur* in such articles. Indeed, we are very much afraid that if the Chevalier Gumbinnen had sought to raise a loan upon all the personal property which was included under this particular head, the pawnbroker would have pronounced the diamonds to be paste, and would have found that the gold chains passed not readily though the ordeal of the testing acid. In a word, this foreign gentleman's appearance was sufficient to mystify Christian considerably as to who or what he could possibly be.

Without speaking a word, the Chevalier Gumbinnen drew forth a somewhat soiled pocket-book: and producing thence a dirty scrap of paper, displayed it before Christian's eyes,—at the same time fixing upon him a look of knowingness rather than of well-bred inquiry. It was our hero's own advertisement, cut out of the *Times;* he therefore hastened to declare that it was so, and that he was the C. A. therein specified. Still the Chevalier maintained a profound silence: so that Christian was at a loss whether to conclude that his visitor was altogether dumb, or that he was merely unable to comprehend the English language. Again however was the Chevalier's hand plunged into the pocket-book; and now he drew forth a larger card than his own, and which he presented to our hero. It was not the cleanest in the world: but nevertheless, whatsoever it had on it was perfectly visible. On the upper part there was a sovereign crown; and under it there was the name of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. The address in the right hand corner was *Mivart's Hotel.*

Here was grandeur! It was evidently a reigning Duke who was sending for Christian; and doubtless the Chevalier Gumbinnen was some high dignitary attached to the person of his Royal Highness. Such was the conclusion to which our hero naturally came. He looked at the Chevalier; and the Chevalier looked at him. Did the Chevalier mean to speak?—or, indeed, could he speak at all? Christian could not help thinking it was rather a strange proceeding to send this silent gentleman on such a business; and he began to feel somewhat awkward. The Chevalier however condescended presently to relieve him from his embarrassment: for, taking out a somewhat cumbrous watch—which would doubtless have been considered handsome in the time when pinchbecks were in fashion—he displayed the dial before Christian's eyes; and pointing to the hour of *four*, gave a sort of significant grunt, and then stared for half a minute in the youth's countenance, to assure himself that the intimation was comprehended. Christian bowed: the Chevalier made a very slight and condescendingly dignified inclination of the head—put on his napless hat—and took his departure.

The whole proceeding was singular enough: but Christian understood that he was to call at Mivart's Hotel to see his Royal Highness, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, at four o'clock. It was now a little past three; and therefore our hero had only just time to dress himself in his best apparel and set off to Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. While proceeding thither, his thoughts were divided between Isabella Vincent and the business on which he was now bent. He of course imagined that the Duke required an English secretary; and hence the application to himself, made through that very interesting, intelligent, and enlightening person the Chevalier Gumbinnen. Christian could have wished to remain a week or two longer at Mrs. Chubb's ere entering upon another situation: but he had his bread to get, and must not throw away a chance. Besides, it suddenly occurred to him that as the Duke was residing at an hotel, and was not likely to remain very long absent from his own dominions, it was perhaps only a temporary occupation about to be offered him, and one which would still enable him to occupy his lodgings beneath the same roof with the lovely Isabella.

While making these reflections, Christian arrived at Mivart's Hotel,—at the door of which a waiter was lounging with a white napkin in his hand, looking up the street as if in contemplation of some beautiful prospect, although there was in reality nothing to be seen except what must have been familiar enough to the man's view. But no one ever did observe an hotel waiter standing at the street-door, who was not thus staring fixedly in one particular direction.

"I have been directed," said Christian to the waiter, "to attend at this hour upon the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Very good, sir," was the man's response, as he slowly desisted from gazing up the street. "Please to follow me, and I will take you to Baron Raggidbak."

Christian for a moment thought that the waiter was putting off upon him an insolent jest: but as the man spoke with an air of perfect seriousness, and at the same time began to lead the way up the staircase, our hero followed, though still marvelling at the extraordinary title of the nobleman to whom he was about to be presented. They ascended to the first landing,—where the waiter, opening a door, ushered Christian into a sort of ante-chamber, in which a tall, thin, hungry-looking man—moustached and bearded—dressed very much in the style of the Chevalier Gumbinnen, and whose appearance combined an equal amount of tawdriness and shabbiness—was lounging in an arm-chair by the fire, reading a German newspaper, very dirty and very much crumpled.

"This is Baron Raggidbak, his Royal Highness's Groom of the Stole," said the waiter in an undertone to Christian: and then the man withdrew.

Our hero advanced with a respectful salutation towards the high functionary who was seated by the fire; and the high functionary, laying down the newspaper, surveyed Christian in a sort of supercilious manner, as if determined to see what he was made of ere introducing him to his ducal master. At length he condescended to speak; and in so doing, displayed at least one advantage over the Chevalier Gumbinnen.

"You sall be de yong mans what de Lord Chamberlain did come for to go after dis afternoon?" was the question which Baron Raggidbak put to Christian.

Our hero bowed, and said, "Yes, my lord."

"Vare goot!" said the Baron, complacently caressing his bearded chin, and now looking far more favourably upon our hero, as if that respectful appellation of "my lord" had considerably sweetened the temper of the Groom of the Stole. "You vare quick wid de pen? you vare clever wid de writin' and de spellin' in de Inglis langvidge—eh?"

"I have a testimonial to exhibit, my lord," answered Christian, "which I think will be satisfactory."

"Vare goot!" said the Baron, still caressing his chin with one hand, and playing with a copper-gilt watch chain with the other: "den you sall succeed wit his Royal Highness! Ah! dis is de Chevalier Kadger! De Chevalier is de—how you call him?——de querry to his Royal Highness; and de Chevalier sall go for to introduce you."

The Chevalier Kadger, who entered the ante-room at the moment, wore a sort of military uniform, of dark green cloth, tolerably threadbare, with tarnished gold lace, and red stripes down the pantaloons. He was a heavy, sleepy, vulgar-looking man, with dark wiry hair brushed straight off from his forehead, and a very fierce moustache. He said something in German to the Baron Raggidbak, at which they both chuckled in what Christian fancied to be a somewhat vulgar manner. The Chevalier Kadger then planted himself close in front of our hero, contemplating him slowly from head to foot. Christian underwent this inspection with exemplary patience, inasmuch as he thought it one of the necessary preliminaries to the successful attainment of his object. But as he stood with his eyes modestly bent down, he became aware of a certain disagreeable odour floating around him, and which seemed to be compounded of stale tobacco-smoke, garlic, and rum. At first he fancied he must certainly be mistaken, as such an ignoble effluence could scarcely have its source in the person of so distinguished a character as the Chevalier Kadger, Equerry-in-waiting to a reigning Duke. But when there was no longer a possibility of resisting his own convictions, and when his olfactory organs proved beyond all mistake that it was veritably and truly the Chevalier's person which was thus redolent of garlic, rum, and bad cigars (the last-mentioned being evidently full-flavoured Cubas) Christian was certainly astonished. However, he was now on the point of being conducted into the presence of the Duke; and he thought to himself that he should find in this distinguished Prince a very great contrast with the appearance of those personages of his suite whom he had as yet seen.

The Chevalier Kadger preceded Christian with his person, and likewise with the ordour that hung about him. He paused for a moment in an adjacent room to speak to a dirty, seedy-looking, unkempt man, who was taking out plate from a box, and who, as our hero subsequently learnt, was Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse. They passed on to another room, where Christian beheld a tall personage—somewhat stout, under forty years of age, coarse-featured, and vulgar-looking—dressed in some strange sort of military uniform, with a star upon his breast. The uniform had evidently seen good service; and if it had pertained to an English nobleman, would long since have found its way into the hands of his valet, and thence to some old clothes' shop in Holywell Street. As for the star, it was certainly an ingenious combination of pieces of different-coloured glass set in plated metal,—looking very much like a "theatrical property;" and its value might have been about three and sixpence. This personage was lounging near a window, in conversation with the Chevalier Gumbinnen and three or four other worthies, whose appearance was of corresponding seediness and tawdriness. The effect produced by this group was perhaps more novel than satisfactory; and Christian thought to himself that if this were the Duke, he was a strange-looking man for a reigning sovereign, and had a strange-looking retinue. But there was certainly one thing in his favour—that he evidently strove not to throw his adherents into the shade by any super-excellence on the score of his own outfit.

The Chevalier Kadger beckoned Christian to advance; and the Chevalier Gumbinnen, acting the part of Lord Chamberlain and Master of the Ceremonies, presented the youth to the high and mighty Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha: but though the Chevalier spoke in German, it was nevertheless a sort of satisfaction to our hero's mind to discover that he had the faculty of speech at all. The youth bowed low to his Royal Highness, who motioned him to draw still nearer—and then began to converse with him in tolerably good English.

"It is my purpose to remain about a month in this country," said the Duke; "for which period I require the services of a young gentleman to write letters in English for me to those noble and illustrious personages with whom I may have to correspond. Does such a position suit you?"

Christian answered in the affirmative; and the Duke continued speaking.

"I shall require your attendance every morning at ten o'clock; and you may consider the hours of occupation to be until five: because, in addition to the management of my English correspondence, you will have to make notes of certain statistical details which I am anxious to obtain, and the sources of which will be duly furnished to you. Have you testimonials?"

Christian produced the one which he had obtained from the Duke of Marchmont; and this of course proved eminently satisfactory. His Royal Highness inquired the amount of salary which Christian expected? This little matter was soon arranged; and he was informed that Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, would settle with him weekly. The audience now terminated; and Christian was conducted from the august presence by the Chevalier Kadger, the odour emanating from whose breath and garments had not appeared to affect the olfactory nerves of his ducal master in the slightest degree, although it was particularly strong, and in its combinations none of the most fragrant. But then, Christian thought to himself, the Duke had perhaps grown accustomed to inhale the atmosphere which his Equerry carried about with him; and the old adage says that "use is second nature."

On gaining the ante-chamber, where Baron Raggidbak was again found seated in the armchair near the fire, the Chevalier Kadger laid his hand upon Christian's shoulder; and said, "Me and de Baron sall drink your one goot health in one bottle of wine—or two bottle, begar!—and you sall stop some minutes for de same."

"Vare goot!" exclaimed Baron Raggidbak, caressing his beard with one hand while he gave the bell-pull a violent tug with the other.

Christian could not of course help tarrying in compliance with the wishes of his aristocratic friends: he accordingly sat down; and in a few moments the waiter made his appearance.

"Mine goot mans," said Baron Raggidbak, "you sall go for to bring up two bottles of de port and de sherry wines for de present gumpany."

"A bottle of each, my lord?" said the waiter, putting his hand up to his head with a half-hesitating, half-reflective air.

"Dat is it," responded the Baron: but as the waiter still appeared undecided, and hung about the door as if wanting to say something but not exactly liking to do so, the Groom of the Stole placed his hand on Christian's shoulder, saying, with a certain emphasis, "Dis sall be de yong mans what sall pay for de treat for de present gumpany."

The waiter now suddenly became more cheerful in aspect, and quitted the room with a blithe alacrity. Christian could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. What! his lordship, Baron Raggidbak, Groom of the Stole to a reigning Duke—and the scarcely less distinguished Chevalier Kadger, Equerry to the same illustrious personage—condescending to drink at his expense!—and what was more, inviting themselves to do it! For the moment Christian felt as if he were in the midst of a dream: or else—what really did seem more probable—that he was in the midst of hungry adventurers. But he said not a word; and in a few moments the waiter re-appeared with a decanter of port and another of sherry on a tray, which likewise bore the bill duly made out and receipted,—the wine being charged six shillings a bottle.

"Now, my goot friend," said Baron Raggidbak, "out wid de monies. Dis am de German fashion of making——what you sall call it?——Oh! de acquaintance."

Christian produced a sovereign; and on receiving the change from the waiter, he left half-a-crown lying on the tray for that individual's own fee—a liberality which procured for him a very low bow. The Chevalier Kadger proceeded to fill the glasses—which himself and Baron Raggidbak showed themselves very good hands at emptying also. Christian drank but little; and his abstemiousness was highly complimented by his two aristocratic friends, who had good reason to be rejoiced at it, inasmuch as there was all the more for themselves. The two decanters were emptied in an inconceivably short space of time; and Baron Raggidbak dropped a hint relative to a second supply: but Christian was anxious to run up to the Regent's Park and tell his sister that he had obtained another situation—so that he rose to take his departure, wondering infinitely not merely at the conduct of the Groom of the Stole and the Equerry-in-waiting, but also at the entire appearance of the Duke and his retinue.

As he was about to issue from the hotel, he was encountered by the same waiter who had brought up the wine, and who was now crossing the hall at the moment. The man paused, and looked at Christian as if he wished to speak to him; and as our young hero himself was anxious to hear something more relative to the personages amongst whom accident had thrown him, he paused likewise. The waiter thereupon said, "Just step into this room, sir."

Christian followed the man, who carefully closed the door; and then said, "I beg your pardon, sir, but as I see that you are a liberal young gentleman, I don't like you to stand the chance of being robbed."

"Robbed?" ejaculated our hero. "Why—is not that really a Duke?"

"Oh, yes, sir! he is a Duke fast enough: but such a Duke!" exclaimed the waiter contemptuously. "I am sure my master would like to be well quit of him and all his beggarly crew of hungry Germans, with their hard names, their airs, their meanness, and their insolence. Perhaps you saw, sir, that I hesitated to bring up the wine when that fellow Raggidbak ordered it? The fact is the Duke has given positive instructions that nothing is to be supplied except by command of Count Wronki, the Lord Steward."

"But this is most extraordinary!" cried young Ashton, lost in bewilderment.

"Oh, extraordinary indeed!" echoed the waiter. "I never saw such a wretched set of paupers in my life. They don't seem to have a farthing amongst them—I mean the Duke's retinue; and between you and me, sir, I don't think the Duke himself is over troubled with cash. Of course you know that whenever he visits this country, all his travelling expenses, both coming and going, are paid by the English government. These rooms too which they occupy, are paid from a certain quarter."

"From whence?" inquired Christian.

"Why, from Buckingham Palace, to be sure," responded the waiter. "Ah! the people generally little think what a mean beggarly horde these German fellows are, with all their titles of Duke, Count, Baron, and Chevalier. I tell you what, sir—there isn't as much linen amongst them all as any ordinary English gentleman possesses; and such linen as it is!—why, the washerwoman is afraid it will fall to pieces in the rubbing and wringing out. And then their clothes too!" added the waiter, shrugging his shoulders with the supremest contempt. "But what I wanted to guard you against, sir, is this—that if you let those fellows get hold of you, they will spunge upon you—they will make you pay for wines, spirits, and cigars—they will pluck you like any pigeon. So pray take care; and don't say that I dropped you this hint, as it would only get me into trouble."

Christian reassured the man upon the point—thanked him for his well-meant information—and took his departure, wondering still more at the various details he had just received in respect to the German Duke and his retainers.

Having paid a hasty visit to Christina, Christian returned to his lodgings at the parish-clerk's house, and he sought in one of the books which he possessed, some information relative to the Duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. He found that it was of the meanest territorial extent—with a population of a few thousands of souls—with a beggarly revenue—and with an army enumerated only by hundreds. He had previously no very exalted idea of the German Principalities: but he had not suspected that any one of them was so poor and paltry as this. However, he thought to himself that his own salary would be tolerably safe, and that it would at least enhance his interest to be enabled at the close of his engagement to obtain a testimonial from a reigning Duke.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

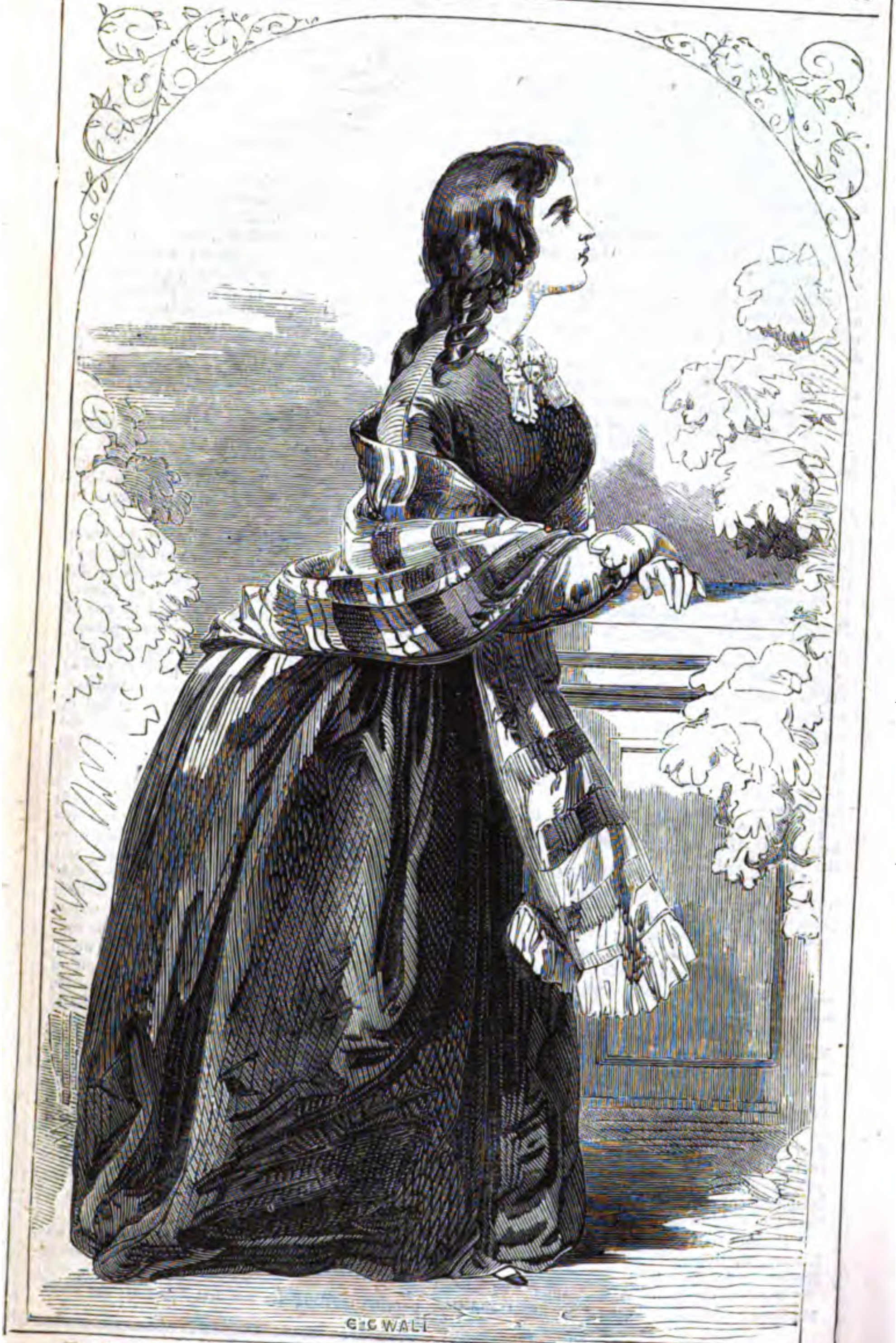
A PLOT.

We must now once more direct the reader's attention to the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment; and if we peep into the splendidly furnished apartment whence there was the mirror-contrived communication with the tailor's house next door, we shall find Lettice with the German and French girls, sitting together. Lettice Rodney therefore—disregarding Mr. Redcliffe's advice—had returned to that abode of splendid infamy.

It was noon, on the day following that on which Christian called at Mivart's Hotel; and thus Lettice had been back exactly one week. She had told Madame Angelique everything that had occurred: but vainly had she endeavoured to recollect who the individual could be who had extorted from her the revelation of the whole proceedings. It will be remembered that she fancied his voice was not unfamiliar to her, but that she had totally failed to obtain a glimpse of his countenance in the darkness of the night: so that the scene with him had ended by leaving her still in complete ignorance of who he was. Madame Angelique was much troubled: for she could not help thinking that the same individual who had thus behaved towards Lettice Rodney, had spirited away Eveleen O'Brien. Not for an instant, however, did her suspicions rest on Mr. Redcliffe: for he had paid her bounteously at the time, and the girls had assured her that he had entered with spirit into the festivities of that particular evening. As for the Duke of Marchmont, Madame Angelique did not dread his anger on Lettice's account: for under all the circumstances, she did not consider that any blame could attach itself to the young woman, who, when menaced with the law, and finding the plot more or less known to her mysterious midnight questioner, had naturally saved herself from ulterior consequences by adopting the course which is known to the reader. Indeed, Madame Angelique was herself somewhat irritated against the Duke, that he should have so seriously compromised her own establishment in respect to the dresses, and likewise in respect to the purpose for which Lettice Rodney had been required in the neighbourhood of Oaklands. A hastily penned note from his Grace, written immediately after the explosion of the plot, had assured Madame Angelique that she had little to dread on the part of the Duchess; as he (the Duke) would guarantee this much; and though Madame Angelique might thenceforth lose the custom of the Duchess, she should receive an ample indemnification from Marchmont's own purse.

Thus stood matters in respect to Madame Angelique and her establishment after the transaction at Oaklands;—and now, having given these necessary explanations, we return to the luxuriously furnished apartment in which we find Lettice Rodney, Armantine, and Linda seated.

It was noon; and they were all three in a charming *deshabillée*. Lettice was reclining in a chair, reading a new novel aloud to her companions—both of whom, as the reader will recollect, understood English to perfection. The fine



EVELEEN O'BRIEN.

form of Lettice Rodney was stretched out in a voluptuous abandonment, which, though at the moment unstudied, gave a more luxurious effect to the rich contours of her shape. Linda, the German girl, was seated upon the sofa: Armantine, the French one, occupied a chair opposite to Lettice;—and both were all attention to some very pathetic love-passage which Lettice was at the time reading to them. Presently the door opened somewhat abruptly; and Madame Angelique made her appearance.

"What do you think, my dear girls?" she exclaimed in considerable excitement: "that treacherous wretch, Eveleen O'Brien, has gone back to her parents!"

Lettice started in astonishment: but both Linda and Armantine sighed audibly, as they inwardly wished that they possessed homes to which they dared return.

"Yes—it is true!" cried Madame Angelique, who was too much excited to observe the half-subdued evidences of compunction and regret, as well as of wistful longing, which the two foreign girls had displayed. "And what is more, she has had the impudence to write to me!"

"And what does she say?" asked Lettice, full of curiosity.

"She says that through the generous intervention of a friend whom heaven sent her, she has been snatched away from a life of infamy. Only think of this! She, who—as well as you, my dears—revelled in every luxury, eat and drank of the best, and wore the handsomest clothes——"

"But does she threaten you?" inquired Lettice.

"No: and that is the only consolation in the matter," responded Madame Angelique, somewhat softened as she thought of it. "She says that her parents received her with open arms—and that as they at once assured her an everlasting veil should be drawn over the past, they pressed her for no explanations in respect to her career since she had left them."

"And of course she does not want to make a noise about it?" observed Lettice. "But why did she write to you?"

"To state that as she is disposed to practise the utmost forbearance, and never allude to me or my proceedings, she stipulates that on my part I will refrain from ever mentioning Eveleen O'Brien as having been an inmate of this house."

"Ah! I suppose she means to become respectable now!" interjected Lettice, with a contemptuous smile.

"And perhaps she hopes to marry!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But perchance things won't go on quite so pleasantly as she anticipates. Look here, my dear Lettice!—it is of the utmost consequence we should discover who the man was that extorted those revelations from you the other day, down in the country. It is dangerous that there should be a person knowing so much about you as he evidently did—and therefore about this establishment—and we on the other hand not to have the slightest conjecture who *he* is?"

"Perhaps he is the same kind friend," observed Lettice, sneeringly, "whom heaven sent to restore Eveleen to her parents?"

"That's exactly what I think!" exclaimed Madame Angelique: "because her flight and that affair down at Oaklands took place pretty nearly at the same time. Now, Eveleen knew certain things about the counterpart dresses; and she knew also that you were going off to the neighbourhood of Oaklands——"

"And therefore it is only reasonable to conclude," exclaimed Lettice, "that Eveleen, the traitress! gave that mysterious stranger certain information which put him on the watch and led him to intercept me."

"Should you like a trip to Ireland, my dear girl?" inquired Madame Angelique, patting Lettice caressingly on her bare shoulder.

"That I should!" exclaimed the young woman.

"Then you shall go," responded Madame Angelique. "You can throw yourself in the way of Eveleen—you can affect to be very penitent, and to have left my establishment altogether——"

"Oh, leave me to manage it!" cried Lettice, already exulting in the prospect of success. "I will worm myself into Eveleen's confidence—I will get everything out of her. When shall I depart?"

"To-day, if you will," rejoined Madame Angelique: "no time need be lost! And remember!—if you can entice Eveleen back again, so much the better. She is much too beautiful to lose; and besides, it would be a glorious triumph for us to accomplish."

The preparations could not however be made for Lettice Rodney's departure on that same day: but at nine o'clock on the ensuing morning she took her place in a first-class carriage at Euston Square, her destination being Liverpool by way of Birmingham. There was only one other passenger in the same compartment; and this was a lady of nearly the same age as Lettice herself, as well as being by no means unlike her in personal appearance. She was almost of as tall a stature and of similarly well developed contours of shape: she was decidedly handsome too, though not of so remarkably striking a beauty as the other. She was well dressed: her appearance was genteel, and indicative of the well-bred lady. As the train started, Lettice surveyed her companion, and was surveyed by this companion in return. They were the only two occupants of the compartment; and being of the same sex, it was but natural that they should soon get into conversation. Lettice Rodney assumed, as a matter of course, as modest and retired an air as possible, in order to be consistent with the part of a respectable lady which she was playing, as well as to obviate any suspicion that might arise as to her true character: for there are thousands of people in this world—especially among the female sex—who, though displaying a bold hardihood and brazen effrontery when in the midst of scenes of vicious dissipation, are nevertheless anxious enough to cloak their true characters when beyond the sphere of their irregularities. In the same way that the poor often struggle and strive to put on the appearance of ease and competency, so do the immoral endeavour to apparel themselves with the raiment of morality, and the immodest to assume the air and complexion of modesty.

During the first half-hour the discourse was limited to the mere exchange of those casual observations and indifferent remarks which, with persons meeting for the first time, are the necessary preliminaries to a more familiar and continuous strain of conversation. Lettice found her travelling-companion to be a young lady of unassuming manners, somewhat simple-minded, and disposed to enter with an ingenuous frankness upon the objects of the journey on which she was bent. Lettice chose likewise to be communicative,—not however to reveal the real truth in respect to the motives of her own journey, but to chatter away in her own style for the sake of appearing important in the estimation of her travelling companion. She accordingly stated that she was on her way to Ireland to pass a few weeks with some friends in the neighbourhood of Dublin,—dropping a hint that these friends were of aristocratic rank, and availing herself of the opportunity to lead her fellow-traveller to infer that she belonged to a wealthy and influential family. The reader knows how much of all this was true: it was however believed by Lettice Rodney's travelling-companion, who was inspired by such confidences to become all the more communicative on her own part.

It now transpired that this lady was named Rayner, and that she was a widow. Presently it further appeared that her Christian name was Louisa,—an intimation which elicited from Lettice Rodney's lips a remark on the singularity of the coincidence that their names should have the same initials. In short, as the journey progressed, the two ladies became more and more intimate and familiar; and inasmuch as no other passenger was introduced to their compartment of the carriage at any of the stations where the train stopped, the flow of their conversation proceeded uninterruptedly. We may now record those details which Lettice Rodney received from the lips of Mrs. Rayner, in respect to certain circumstances of her life, as well as the special motives which had led to the journey she was now undertaking.

It appeared that Louisa was left an orphan at the age of eleven,—both her parents being carried off suddenly by some epidemic disease, and with only a short interval between their deaths. Louisa was then removed to the house of a certain Mr. Anthony Pollard, a lawyer at Liverpool, and who was left her guardian. He was no relation: but doubtless Louisa's father, when making his will, had his own good reasons for appointing this gentleman to act as trustee for whatsoever property he might leave his daughter. Mr. Pollard was an elderly man—a widower—of eccentric habits—loving money with a miserly devotion—and carrying his parsimony to almost every extreme which is usually associated with the greed of gain and the passion of mammon-worship. Louisa remained but a few weeks at his house, and was then sent to a boarding-school at some town a considerable distance off. Here she was kept throughout the holidays; and though kindly treated by the mistress of the establishment, and adequately supplied with pocket-money,—yet still she could not help feeling how bitter and poignant it was to know of no place in the wide world which she could look forward to visit or be enabled to speak of as *her home*. At this school she remained until she was seventeen,—never once seeing Mr. Pollard—only occasionally hearing from him, when in a curtly written letter he remitted her money and expressed a hope that she was attentive and docile to her preceptress. But no hope that she was happy was ever hinted at in those letters: it appeared as if her guardian considered he was fulfilling the extent of his duty by acting as a mere man of business, and that he was by no means bound to demonstrate any of those kindnesses which her lost parents would have shown, or which she might have looked for on the part of relations—if she had possessed any.

The schoolmistress was occasionally visited by a nephew of her own—a young gentleman of handsome person, agreeable manners, and pleasing address. He was four years older than Louisa, and consequently twenty-one at the period when she attained her seventeenth year. He had just inherited the little property bequeathed to him by his own parents; for he likewise was an orphan. To be brief, a mutual affection sprang up on the part of the school-girl and the nephew of the schoolmistress: tender billets were exchanged—vows of eternal fidelity were pledged. The circumstance was discovered—and the young gentleman was ordered by his indignant aunt to absent himself altogether from the house so long as Louisa remained beneath the roof. The schoolmistress was a well-principled and conscientious woman: she communicated at once with Mr. Pollard at Liverpool; and this gentleman wrote to signify his intention of proceeding in the course of a day or two to fetch his ward away from the school. The romance had thus reached that point at which the various complications could not possibly lead to any other result than that which the reader doubtless anticipates. The nephew of the schoolmistress found means to communicate secretly with Louisa: she was almost broken-hearted at the thought of being eternally separated from her lover, and of being borne back again to her guardian's cheerless house at Liverpool—of which house her recollections of some six years back, were by no means agreeable. She therefore yielded to the entreaties of her admirer: she fled with him: but he was an honourable young man—and the elopement was immediately crowned by marriage.

The newly-wedded pair proceeded to France, whence Louisa—now Mrs. Rayner—wrote to Mr. Pollard, explaining to him that she had consulted her own happiness in the step which she had taken, and that if she had thereby proved undutiful and disobedient to the will of her guardian, she solicited his forgiveness. She did not however experience much, if any compunction at having thus flown, as it were, in Mr. Pollard's face; for his conduct towards her had never been calculated by any kindness to win her esteem. The letter he wrote back, was pretty well that which might have been expected from the callous-minded man of business. It was to the effect, that as she had chosen to regulate her own destinies, and cater for her own happiness according to the dictates of her inclinations, he could acquit himself of any violation of the trust confided to him by her deceased parents: he informed her that she was entitled to three thousand pounds on attaining the age of twenty-one—and that in the meantime he would regularly remit her the interest. He offered no felicitations upon her marriage—but on the other hand, gave no direct expression to any displeasure on his own part. The letter contained not the remotest hint to the effect that he would be gratified to receive a visit from herself and her husband: it did not even so much as intimate that if circumstances should bring them near Liverpool, he hoped they would call upon him:—but this formal and purely business-like communication wound up by the announcement that when the young lady should reach the period of her majority, she must present herself to him in order to sign the necessary releases and receive the amount of her little fortune.

Happily enough passed away the two years of Louisa's wedded life: for to two years was it limited!—and as is often the case in this world, the dream of felicity which is soonest to be dissipated is the brightest and most beautiful while it lasts. Mr. Rayner was drowned in a boating-excursion at some French seaport where they were staying at the time; and thus, with a cruel and terrible abruptness, the unfortunate Louisa found herself a widow. When the roseate atmosphere in which the soul has been for a period accustomed to exist, is thus suddenly changed into a worse than Egyptian darkness, it appears to the sufferer as if this black obscurity would be eternal—and that the mind, paralysed by dread consternation and crushed by overwhelming grief, could never by its own energies accomplish an issue thence. But there is no misfortune so terrible that the sense it produces will not gradually pass into a phase of resignation; and then from resignation there is a natural transition to that improved and healthier state of feeling in which the mind begins to discover that the world may yet have sources of happiness left for its experience.

Two years had elapsed since the death of Mr. Rayner; and Louisa had put off her widow's-weeds about a fortnight before the date on which we find her travelling in the society of Lettice Rodney. By a somewhat singular coincidence, too, she attained her majority on the very day when the period of her mourning expired. The reader may now easily surmise for what purpose she was bound to Liverpool:—it was to call upon her guardian Anthony Pollard, the miserly old lawyer, and receive from him the amount of her fortune. Such was the narrative which Lettice Rodney learnt from Mrs. Rayner's lips; and the young woman could not help secretly wishing that she herself was on her way to receive three thousand pounds, instead of to carry out the deeply devised plot in respect to Eveleen O'Brien.

"Your tale, Mrs. Rayner, has deeply interested me," said Lettice. "But do you not tremble at the thought of appearing in the presence of such a hard stern man as your guardian Mr. Pollard seems to be?"

"I can assure you, Miss Rodney," replied the handsome widow, "that I experience no such trepidation. It is true that full ten years have now elapsed since I last beheld him: but my memory has faithfully retained the impression which Mr. Pollard made upon me at the time, during the few weeks I was beneath his roof. He is a man of the fewest possible words; and I am confident that he will not seek to engage me in any unnecessary discourse. He will not speak of the past more than is absolutely requisite to the settlement of the business which is to bring us in contact. I therefore entertain no apprehension that he will in any way revive the poignancy of my feelings on account of the cruel and irreparable loss which I have sustained. Indeed, so far as I can exercise my judgment on the subject, I have every reason to believe that our interview will prove a brief one, and that within an hour from the moment of our meeting the business will be settled."

"I am truly glad," observed Lettice, "to receive the assurance that you anticipate no manifestation of ill-feeling on Mr. Pollard's part. Although we have known each other but a few short hours, I feel an interest in all that concerns you."

"And this interest, Miss Rodney, is reciprocated," rejoined Mrs. Rayner.

The discourse continued awhile in a similar strain: but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that while Lettice expressed a feeling of interest more for the sake of saying something than because she really experienced it, and also for the purpose of making her companion believe that she was a very right-minded young lady,—Mrs. Rayner's assurances of kindly sympathies were, on the other hand, perfectly genuine and sincere. As the discourse continued, Mrs. Rayner was naturally led on to minuter details in respect to the past incidents of her life; and as Lettice could not bear to be silent or unoccupied—and moreover, inasmuch as she was endowed with no small share of true feminine curiosity—she, by her interjected observations, as well as by her questions, encouraged her companion to as much communicativeness as she chose to demonstrate. Thus did the hours pass away, while the train was pursuing its course of almost marvellous rapidity; and the two ladies mutually congratulated themselves that they should thus have been thrown together.

It was at some point—no matter precisely which—between Birmingham and Manchester, that the conversation was all in an instant cut short, as if a thunderbolt had come crashing through the roof of the carriage. As Lettice Rodney subsequently described the occurrence, she was for a moment—and only for that single moment—sensitive to an abrupt shock: it was quick as the eye can wink—and the next instant consciousness abandoned her. As she slowly came back to her senses, she became aware that she was lying on the slope of an embankment, and that some gentleman, of middle-age, was bending over her, and ministering restoratives. It appeared to her like a dream: she closed her eyes as if to shut out all external objects, the better to concentrate her mental vision inwardly, and thus arrive at some comprehending of what it was that she thought and felt. There was a dull heavy sounding in the brain—a sense of numbness over all the faculties—a blending of uncertainty and vague consternation in the mind. Again she opened her eyes—but only to receive additional confirmation of the awful suspicion which, hitherto dim, indefinite, and clouded, had hung in her brain. The gentleman spoke a few kind words of mingled encouragement and inquiry; and these still farther served to stamp the horrible conviction in the soul of Lettice that what she had fancied and apprehended was no dream, but all a too hideous reality. In a word, an accident had happened to the train;—several of the carriages, being thrown off the line, were literally dashed to atoms; and numerous deaths, as well as frightful injuries, mutilations, and contusions, were the consequence.

The gentleman whom Lettice found bending over her, was a surgeon who happened to be in the ill-fated train; and as he was unhurt, he had rendered all possible assistance to those passengers who, though escaping death, were otherwise less fortunate than himself. Lettice had been merely stunned by the first shock of the accident: she was in all other respects completely uninjured; and in a few minutes after her return to consciousness, she was enabled to rise and move about. The scene which presented itself to her contemplation, was a frightful and a sad one. The line was encumbered in one part with the overturned carriages—and in another strown with the fragments of the shattered ones. Boxes, trunks, and portmanteaux were heaped pell-mell together,—some having been broken open by the fall, and the articles of apparel, both male and female, all cast out and mixed together. On the slope of the embankment several wounded persons lay here and there; and in another part there was a horrible array of mutilated and disfigured corpses. As the eyes of Lettice wandered over this fearful grouping of the dead, her heart sickened within her, and she felt her brain reel, on catching sight of the apparel of her travelling-companion, the unfortunate Mrs. Rayner. Yes—but it was only by the raiment that the deceased could be thus recognised: for her countenance was so horribly disfigured that scarcely a lineament, much less a trace of its former beauty, remained. Lettice—though, as the reader is aware, far from possessing any extreme sensibility—was nevertheless shocked and horrified at this tragic occurrence which had thus cut off an amiable lady in the bloom of her youth as well as in the early summer of her beauty, and at the very time she was on her way to receive the inheritance bequeathed by her parents. Lettice staggered back as she averted her eyes from the shocking spectacle, and would have fallen if she had not been caught in the arms of the surgeon who was still near her.

Those who have been unfortunate enough to witness a terrific railway accident, are but too painfully aware of the dread confusion which is superadded to the horror of the scene; and those who have been happy enough to escape such a spectacle, may nevertheless grasp with their imagination the full range of its supervening circumstances. The moans of the wounded sufferers mingling with the shrieks, the cries, and the lamentations of relatives who have survived the dead—the hurrying to and fro of half-dismayed officials—the process of disencumbering the line as speedily as possible—and the flocking of horrified persons to the spot, when the accident occurs in the close vicinage of a town,—these are the salient characteristics of the scene following upon the appalling drama. And so it all was on the present occasion. But it does not suit the purpose of our tale to dwell at any greater length thereon: suffice it to say that the surgeon who had hitherto shown so much attention to Lettice Rodney, now advised her to enter one of the vehicles which were by this time near the spot, and proceed to the town which was at no great distance. He assured her that she must not think of continuing her journey until the morrow; for that at least a good night's rest was requisite after the shock which she had experienced, and which, unless she was careful, might be followed by concussion of the brain. She did indeed feel like one bewildered and whose thoughts were all in confusion. The medical man was kind and attentive: he gave her his arm, and conducted her towards the piles of luggage that she might select her own boxes. Here again was a fresh source of bewilderment for Lettice Rodney: for she beheld some of her own dresses and other articles of apparel scattered about. The surgeon assisted her to separate them from the rest with which they were mixed up; and on learning from her what her name was, he took the trouble to search for everything which was marked with the initials L. R. In short, after much trouble, perplexity, and confusion, the good-natured surgeon succeeded in filling a couple of boxes the lids of which were broken off, with those effects which Lettice had either been enabled to point out, or which he himself conceived to belong to her from the indications already mentioned: then, having seen her safe into a vehicle, together with her baggage, he took his leave,—hastening to render his assistance to the next sufferer who required it.

Lettice Rodney was borne to the principal hotel in the town near to the spot where the accident occurred; and feeling exceedingly unwell, she at once retired to bed. It was not until the third day after the accident that the effects of the shock began to wear off. It had been followed, as the medical man more than half predicted, by slight concussion, evidenced in a certain ringing in the ears and a continuous droning sound in the brain, as well as by heaviness of the head and confusion of the thoughts. During these three days, therefore, Lettice kept her bed, and was attended upon by a surgeon living in the town. When however she began to get better, she felt anxious to learn some particulars as to the results of the accident; and a local newspaper was accordingly furnished her. The particulars of the tragic occurrence itself, as well as of the proceedings before the Coroner, were given with the wonted minuteness of detail; and in perusing the sad narrative, Lettice observed that the names of all the killed were given with the exception of one lady, who was represented as being altogether unknown. It appeared, indeed, that she had no card-case with her; nor about her person was there discovered any letter or other document affording the slightest clue to the establishment of her identity. Now, as the name of Mrs. Rayner was altogether omitted from the list of killed, Lettice Rodney at once comprehended that it was this very name which ought to fill up the blank left in the sad catalogue, and that the unknown lady thus described was none other than her travelling-companion!

Lettice was making up her mind to give this information to the landlord of the hotel, or to the surgeon who was attending upon her, with a view to have it conveyed to the proper quarter,—when she began the inspection of her trunks for the first time since she became an inmate of that hotel. She now discovered that there was a variety of articles of linen which did not belong to her, mixed up with those effects which were really her own: but when she perceived that the former were all marked with the initials L. R., she beheld the solution of the mystery. She now recollected the manner in which her things had been looked out from amidst the scattered effects on the scene of the accident; and as she was still farther examining the boxes, to ascertain to what extent she had thus become the unintentional self-appropriatrix of the property of the deceased lady, she discovered a small writing-desk, with the initials L. R. on a brass-plate upon the lid. The desk was open,—the violence with which it had been thrown out at the time from the box that contained it, having no doubt caused the lock to yield; and Lettice Rodney, being hampered with no over-nice scruple, unhesitatingly proceeded to the examination of the contents of the desk. She found several documents closely relating to the deceased Mrs. Rayner's affairs,—the certificate of her birth, as well as that of her marriage—a French passport, describing her personally with as much accuracy as such official papers are enabled, in a limited number of details, to exhibit—and several letters from Mr. Pollard, the lawyer, written at different times and advising her of periodical remittances. There were likewise *memoranda*, evidently penned by the deceased lady herself, and indicating various continental places which she had visited both previous and subsequent to her husband's death—the whole affording a tolerably comprehensive clue to her movements since her elopement from the boarding-school. In a word, the several papers discovered in this desk, superadded to the oral explanations given by Mrs. Rayner in the railway carriage, served to render Lettice as intimately acquainted as it was possible for her to become, with the affairs of the deceased lady.

While Miss Rodney was thus engaged in the perusal of the contents of the desk, an idea gradually began to arise in her mind,—at first vague, indefinite, and impalpable—then acquiring shape and consistency—growing stronger, until at last it became an object perfectly fitted for serious and deliberate contemplation. Lettice sat down and pondered deeply thereon. She surveyed the matter from every distinct point of view—reckoned all the chances of success and the probabilities of failure,—at the same time balancing the risk she might incur with the prize she might gain by playing the stroke boldly. Her mind was made up; and she now no longer considered it expedient to throw any light upon the name of the deceased lady who was represented as unknown in the catalogue of the killed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MISER.

In by no means one of the best streets of Liverpool, was situated the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard, attorney-at-law. He has already been described as a widower, and of grasping miserly habits. Mrs. Rayner, when a child—ten years previous to the time at which we have found her speaking on the subject to Lettice Rodney—had observed his parsimonious character, and was disgusted by it: but during those ten years it had become still more inveterate in its greed for gold—more intense in its eagerness for gain. He had thus acquired all the very worst attributes of the miser,—sacrificing every personal comfort to the sole object which he had in view. And yet, not to his knowledge, did he possess a single relation on the face of the earth: there was no one whom he loved for whose sake he hoarded up gold—no one whom he cared for, to inherit it. The thought troubled him not that when the cold hand of death should be laid heavily on his shoulder, sending through him that congealing chill which knows no thaw,—his heaped-up riches would either devolve to the Crown, or be dissipated in the course of the law's disputes, or become the prey of any plunderers who might gather in his last moments at his bed-side, as the ravens troop to where the corpse will anon be on the field destined for the battle. It was not the question of who should inherit all this wealth, that occupied the mind of Anthony Pollard: it was sufficient for him that *there* was his golden image which he had set up for his own particular worship,—no matter what worshipper might succeed him, nor whether the image itself might be shattered, at his death, by the hand of greedy litigants or of plunderers intent upon a division of the spoil. Most strange indeed is the money-worship of the miser, whose idolatry is purely egotistical, and who ministers not as a high-priest to lead others in the track of the same devotion, as well as towards the same object, and to cherish the hope of possessing the same idol!

Mr. Pollard was a man well stricken in years—tall, lean, and lank—with shrivelled limbs—a cadaverous skin—a sinister expression of countenance—and an eye ever restless in the suspicious glances it was continuously flinging round about. Though so greedy of gain, Pollard was a just man after his own fashion: that is to say, he would scruple not, by means of all the engines of usury, to grind his victims down to the very dust—aye, or even reduce them to beggary, so long as he obtained his own profit: but on the other hand he would religiously fulfil whatsoever obligation he undertook, and whatsoever trust was confided to him. Thus was it that throughout all his dealings in respect to Mrs Rayner, his conduct was marked by the strictest probity; and it is therefore to be presumed that her father, ere his death, had selected him as a trustee from a knowledge of the illimitable confidence that might be reposed in him. Of late years Mr. Pollard had grown so mistrustful of every one about him, that he had almost completely given up his practice as a solicitor, so as to avoid the necessity of keeping clerks and of absenting himself for hours together from his home. Besides, he found money-lending a far more lucrative avocation, and one which he could manage entirely by himself. Thus, at the period when we now introduce him to the reader, he had no clerks in his employment; and his growing habits of parsimony had led him on to diminish his domestic establishment, limiting it at length to a housekeeper and a drab of a servant-girl. The housekeeper who was now in his service, had been with him barely three weeks: but on applying for the situation, she had produced such excellent testimonials, signed by ladies of rank with whom she represented herself to have lived, that Mr. Pollard had unhesitatingly engaged her. Besides, she came from London; and this was an additional recommendation in her favour; because the old man had found—or fancied that he had found the Liverpool servants so extravagant and dishonest, he had made a vow never to take another housekeeper from amongst them. Therefore, when Mrs. Webber—which was the name of the new superintendent of the miser's household—had presented herself three weeks back as a candidate for the post that had fallen vacant, she was speedily accepted—and all the more readily too, because she was so exceedingly moderate on the score of wages. We have spoken of a maid-of-all-work who was kept in addition to Mrs. Webber; and it is requisite for the purposes of our tale that we should add that this girl did not sleep in the house, but came at an early hour in the morning and left at about eight or nine in the evening.

Mr. Pollard's house had never been handsomely furnished; and of late years the greater portion of it was shut up,—it being entirely useless, as he never gave parties—never received guests—and his only visitors were those who came on business. He did not habitually sit in the only parlour that was kept for use: but there was a sort of store-room at the back of the house, on the ground-floor, where he principally sat. The reason can be explained in a few words:—the apartment had certain defences which rendered it, so to speak, a stronghold of the miser's fortress. It had immense iron bars at its only window: it had a huge massive door, that could not possibly be forced open without creating a considerable disturbance; and there was moreover an iron safe let into the thick wall;—so that in every respect was this apartment the one best calculated for Mr. Pollard's use. Here, then, was he accustomed to sit during the day,—proceeding only to the parlour to receive visitors on business: here, in this strong room likewise, did he keep his hoards in the iron safe; and here of late years had he thought fit to sleep at night. For the old miser had grown excessively deaf; and not for worlds would he have slept in any other part of the house, with the chance of an entry being effected by either window or door, and he too dull of hearing to catch the sounds! Every night, before seeking his bed, did he lock and barricade the massive door of the strong room: but it is even a question whether with such defences as were constituted by that wooden barrier and by the bars of the window, the miser slumbered in tranquillity.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—a few days after the railway accident—that we shall find old Anthony Pollard taking his tea and supper (which two meals he, for economy's sake, blended in one) in the strong room just alluded to. A single tallow-candle burnt upon the table: the crockery was of the commonest description; and the bone—for it was a mere bone—upon a cracked dish, was only fit to become a dog's portion, and not to furnish a meal for a hungry man. Unfortunately Mr. Pollard could not over-rule nature's cravings, though he was always endeavouring to persuade himself that he could not afford to gratify them, and that he should be ruined if he did. Thus, though the wretched man really longed for a good substantial meal—and could have devoured it too at any other person's expense, if favoured with an invitation to supper—he nevertheless tried to pick a last morsel from that mutton-bone which really had naught left upon it.

Presently the huge door of the room slowly opened; and Mrs. Webber made her appearance.

"Well, is Alice gone?" demanded Mr. Pollard, thus alluding to the maid-of-all-work.

"Yes, sir—she has gone," was the housekeeper's response, delivered in a loud shrill tone on account of her master's deafness. "And what's more, the slut grumbled because she said I did not give her enough bread and cheese to take home for her supper."

"Ah! you are a good woman, Mrs. Webber!" exclaimed Pollard,—"a very good woman!—thrifty and economical! You are the only housekeeper who has ever yet shown a regard to my interests."

"I always mean to do so, sir," rejoined the woman, with an air of great obsequiousness, notwithstanding that she had to cry out in that shrill manner. "I have let the parlour fire go out, sir," she continued, "as I don't suppose the lady you have been expecting for the last few days will make her appearance this evening?"

"Dear me, how provoking that she does not come!" ejaculated Pollard. "She wrote and said she should be with me a few days back; and here, every day since, have I been having a fire kept in the parlour, and little extras in the larder—because, you see, as I have already told you, Mrs. Webber, I must ask her to stay a day or two with me."

"Well, sir, of course you know best," responded the housekeeper: "but I can't help thinking that you are putting yourself to a very unnecessary expense on account of this Mrs. Rayner."

"Ah! but she can't very well help making me a little present," ejaculated the lawyer, "when I pay her over her money and resign my guardianship. So this little extra civility, Mrs. Webber, will cost me nothing: or I should say, it is only a few shillings laid out at uncommon good interest:"—and the old miser rubbed his hands chucklingly as he thus spoke.

"And who knows, sir," inquired Mrs. Webber, "but what Mrs. Rayner was the lady who was killed the other day by the railway accident?"

"Not likely!" answered the lawyer; "because Mrs. Rayner would have been sure to have papers about her, to identify her: whereas it is very evident from the newspaper reports that the lady who was killed, and who was represented as unknown, had no such papers at all."

"And yet," remarked the housekeeper, "I saw in to-day's paper—which the potboy lent me when he brought the pint of beer for mine and Alice's dinner—that the lady has not been recognised or claimed by any one."

"Recognised indeed!" echoed Pollard: "how can a person with her face smashed to pieces, be possibly recognised? However, if Mrs. Rayner don't come in a day or two—and if I don't hear from her—I shall really begin to think you must be right, and that perhaps after all the unknown lady of the railway accident was my ward Louisa."

"And suppose she's dead, sir?" said the housekeeper inquiringly.

"Ah! if she's dead," responded Pollard, "I must find out her deceased husband's relations, and hand them over the money: for she has got no relations of her own."

"Ah, sir, it's like your strict integrity!" exclaimed Mrs. Webber. "I heard speak of your character in Liverpool the day I applied for the situation; and all that was told me made me indeed most anxious to get it."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Webber," resumed Pollard; "the money shall be righteously dealt with. There it is," he added, glancing towards the safe: then, instantaneously perceiving that he had inadvertently let drop an admission which he was never in the habit of making to a soul—and into which he could only have been thus led by his confidence in his new housekeeper,—he hastened to say, "I mean the money is forthcoming——not here, of course——at the banker's!"

"Oh, to be sure, sir! replied Mrs. Webber: "I know you keep very little ready money in the house; and for my part I tell Alice and the tradespeople that you never have any at all."

"Ah, that's right, my dear good Mrs. Webber!" exclaimed the old miser, his eyes glistening with satisfaction at the assurance she had just given him. "And it's quite true too! I don't think I've got five shillings in the place! No—I'm sure I have not!"—and thus speaking, Mr. Pollard drew forth from his pocket three-halfpence, a fourpenny-piece, a shilling, and a sixpence,—all of which coins he displayed on the palm of his hand, as if the production thereof were irrefragable evidence of the truth of his statement.

"You hav'n't seen this Mrs. Rayner for many years—have you, sir?" inquired the housekeeper.

"It must be ten good years since I last saw her," answered Pollard. "She was then a bit of a girl: but I have heard that she grew up into a very fine handsome woman. I don't suppose I could possibly recognise her; and for this very reason she is sure to bring the proper papers with her to prove her identity. And now you understand why it is that I don't believe the lady who was killed, *can* be Louisa, on account of the absence of all such corroborative documents about her person, or in any box or trunk that might have been supposed to belong to her."

Mrs. Webber now withdrew from her master's presence: but instead of retiring to the kitchen, or to her own chamber, she issued forth from the back-door of the house, and entered the yard. This was surrounded by walls; and in the one at the extremity there was a gate communicating with a narrow alley. The instant Mrs. Webber appeared upon the threshold of this back gate, she was joined by a man who had evidently been lurking in the lane. Not a syllable was spoken until the fellow entered the yard; and then, the gate being closed, he began conversing in an under-tone with Mrs. Webber.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Good, Barney," was the woman's response. "I have just succeeded in discovering that the old chap *has* got a mint of money in the iron safe."

"Ah! you're a clever 'un," said the Burker, in a tone of admiring satisfaction: "you all along declared as how you wos conwinced the old fogey had his blunt in that there wery identical place. Then I s'pose you mean the tidy little job to be done to-night?"

"Yes—to-night," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Is that lady come yet?"

"No—and that's why, after what I've learnt, the business must be for to-night."

"Well, it's a reg'lar blessin'," interjected the Burker, "that you've made up your mind at last, arter all this here hesitating and dilly-dallying which has kept me and Bill Scott all on the tenting-'ooks of suspense."

"Why, you *must* understand, Barney," said the treacherous housekeeper, "that it was better to put off the business for a few days till I could obtain certain and positive information as to whether Pollard had got in the house the money he has to pay to Mrs. Rayner."

"Yes—and with the chance that Mrs. Rayner would suddenly turn up," growled the Burker, "receive her blunt, and walk off with it. It warn't good policy, marm—it warn't good policy."

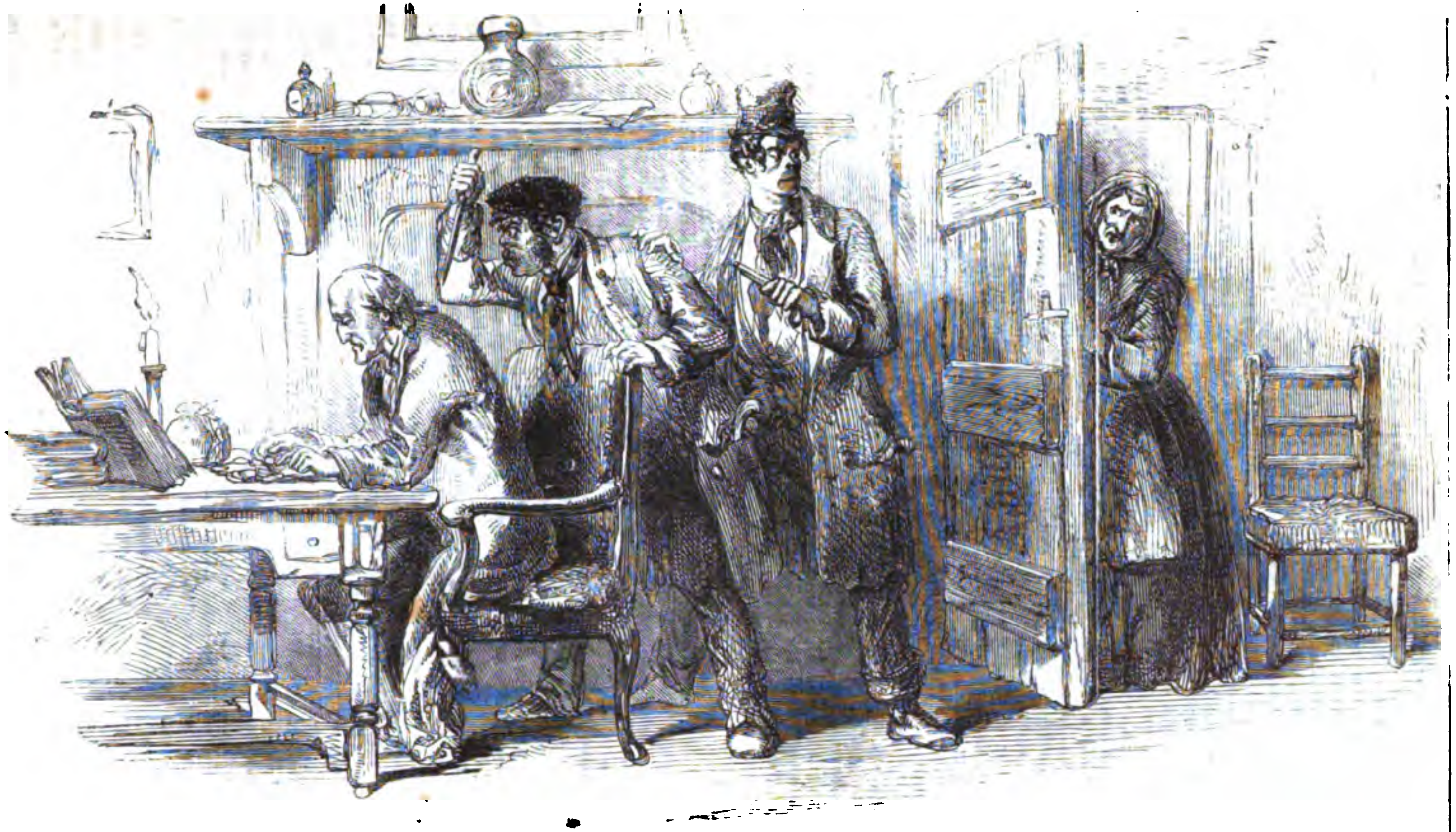
"How absurdly you talk, Barney!" said Mrs. Webber angrily. "I tell you it was absolutely necessary to ascertain whether the old man really kept enough in his house to render it worth while——"

"Well, and now you've got at the rights of the matter," rejoined the delectable Mr. Barnes, "and the business is to be done, right slick off-hand, with no more humbugging delays. Well, that's your sort, marm; and so we won't have no more argyfication on the pint. I'm blest if this Liverpool business won't be the best dodge we was ever put up to. Wasn't it a lucky thing that Jack Smedley should have run down to Liverpool just arter that little bit of business with the lodger—and that he should have heerd tell of this old miser's wanting a housekeeper. I'm blowed if it isn't enough to make a cat or a helephant crack his precious tough sides to think how Pollard bit at them precious stiffikits which Jack drawd up his-self and put all them there fine names to."

"Well, well, Barney," interrupted Mrs. Webber, "don't stand wasting precious time here—but be off with you, and lay hold of Bill Scott, so as to be punctual."

"Bill's handy enow, and as ready to lend a hand as he is to swill his harf-an'-harf, or dewour his biled mutton for supper. And now tell us how it's all to be."

A few whispered arrangements were settled between the treacherous woman and her villanous accomplice; and then they separated. But it struck Barney the Burker that as he emerged from the back gate, his ear caught a sound as of some one darting away—and he farther conjectured that this some one was a female by the rustling of the garments. His keen eyes flung their piercing glances in the same direction: but the alley was involved in total darkness—and he could therefore distinguish nothing. He now rushed forward along the lane: but he overtook no one; and therefore endeavoured to persuade himself that he had either yielded to a false alarm, or else that it was some person belonging to an adjacent house speeding forth on a message, and that the incident had no particular significancy to warrant his transient apprehensions. Still there was a certain vague misgiving in the mind of Barney the Burker; and ere he returned to the



public-house where his worthy acolyte and pupil Bill Scott was awaiting his presence, he lurked about in the lane and its vicinage for upwards of a quarter of an hour. No farther circumstance, however, transpired to renew or confirm his suspicions; and as he at length moved slowly away towards the low public-house or boozing-ken where he had established his head-quarters, he said to himself, "No—it's nuffin to be scared at. As for ghostesses, blow me if I'm the chap which is likely to be surreptitious—superstitious, I mean: and as for any von a-listenin' at the gate and then bowling off in such a manner as that—no, it's all nonsense. 'Twas no doubt a servant-gal a-running for the beer; and some of them gals does flit along just for all the world as if they was wild."

While thus musing, Barney the Burker pursued his way towards the boozing-ken; and in the meantime we must see what had taken place within the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard.

Scarcely had Mrs. Webber issued forth from the house into the back yard, when there was a knock at the front door; and Mr. Pollard, not hearing his housekeeper answer the summons, imagined that she must be otherwise engaged: he accordingly proceeded himself to ascertain who it might be. Taking the candle in his hand, he repaired to the door; and on opening it, perceived a lady of tall stature, well developed form, and good apparel. He at once conceived that this must be Mrs. Rayner; but with his habitual caution, he waited for her to announce herself.

"Mr. Pollard," said Lettice Rodney: for she indeed the visitress was: "we meet again after a long interval."

"It is then you, Louisa," said the old miser: and he took Lettice's hand. "Walk in: I have been expecting you: how is it that you came not before? You must speak loud—for I am afflicted with deafness."

"I experienced an accident," answered Lettice, "which detained me for a few days."

"What! on the railway?" ejaculated Pollard.

"Yes: I was in the train which ran off the lines and upset, causing such dreadful injuries and loss of life."

"Indeed! It was suggested to me," continued Pollard, "that you might be a passenger by that ill-fated train; and I was not altogether without the apprehension that you yourself might have been the unfortunate lady who was not recognised. However, I am heartily glad that it is otherwise; and I give you such poor welcome as my house can afford. Step into the parlour:"—then, as he led the way thither, he exclaimed with an air of vexation, "Dear me, how provoking! That housekeeper of mine has let the fire go out:"—although he perfectly well knew that such was the case.

"Pray, my dear Mr. Pollard," said Lettice, assuming a tone and manner of the sweetest affability, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Indeed, I am well aware that it is an unseemly hour for me to call: but I considered it my duty to pay my respects the very first moment of my arrival in your town. I have only just stepped from the train——"

"And you will take refreshment?" said Mr. Pollard, advancing towards the bell-pull.

"No, I thank you," responded Lettice: "I am wearied, and still unwell from the effects of the recent accident. Now that I have paid my respects and satisfied myself that you are in good health, I will repair to some hotel; and to-morrow will wait upon you at any hour you may choose to appoint."

"I thought that perhaps you would make my house your home for a day or two," answered Pollard: "indeed, your bed-chamber is in readiness. It is the very same you occupied ten years ago."

"You are exceedingly kind," answered Lettice: "and it would be ungrateful indeed on my part not to do your bidding in all things. I have to thank you, Mr. Pollard, for the manner in which you have carried out the trust confided to you by my deceased father—the regularity with which you have made me my periodical remittances——"

"There is no need to thank me," answered Pollard; "and yet I am of course glad that you are satisfied with my guardianship. You will give me credit, Louisa, for having abstained from reproach when you took a certain step——"

"Do not allude to it, my dear sir!" interrupted Lettice, carrying her kerchief to her eyes: "it reminds me but too painfully of my irreparable loss!"

"Yes, yes—it must," said the old miser. "You will remain here, then, for a day or two? It will please me to have the society of one whom I knew as a child, but whom I have not seen until now since her girlhood. I learnt that you had grown up into a fine handsome woman, and I was not deceived. I should not have known you—no, I should not have recognised you: you are different from what I expected you to be—and yet there is the same colour of the hair—yes, and the eyes too—but the profile has taken developments of which your girlhood gave but little promise."

While thus speaking, Anthony Pollard contemplated Lettice Rodney with earnest attention—but yet without any suspicion in his looks or his manner. This was an ordeal that put all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation to the test: it was however one which she had naturally foreseen she would have to pass through, and for which she was consequently prepared. She bore that scrutiny well,—affecting to smile and blush modestly at the compliment which was paid to her beauty;—and that blush also served as a veil for any little trifling confusion which she could not altogether prevent. It was quite evident that the old man had not the remotest misgiving as to the identity of his visitress with Mrs. Rayner; and it was therefore only with a business-like caution that he proceeded to give to the conversation that turn which it now took.

"We were speaking a few minutes back of the railway accident," he said; "and I may now observe that my apprehension as to your having lost your life on the occasion, was but a feeble one—inasmuch as the unrecognised lady appeared not to have in her possession any papers calculated to show who she was."

"And of course you well knew," observed Lettice, with a smile, "that such would not be the case with me. I have in this packet," she continued, producing a small paper parcel, "a variety of documents, which perhaps you will look over at your leisure."

"And where have you left your luggage?" inquired the lawyer.

"At the railway station," answered Lettice. "It was my purpose to ask you to recommend me to a suitable hotel: but since you have been kind enough to insist that I shall take up my temporary abode beneath your roof, I will go and order my effects to be brought hither."

"I cannot think of allowing you to go out again at this late hour," said Mr. Pollard. "The very first thing in the morning I will procure some one to fetch your boxes from the terminus. If you are not cold in this room without a fire, we will sit and chat a little longer; and there will be no harm in my looking at these papers at once: it will save some trouble for the morrow—and then there will be nothing for you to do but sign the releases and receive your money."

Thus speaking, the old man proceeded to open the packet; and putting on his spectacles, he commenced the examination of the documents,—musing audibly as he proceeded.

"The certificate of your birth—aye, to be sure! I remember it well. The certificate of your marriage—and also this French paper containing the proof of your poor husband's death. I am glad you brought it, as it is to a certain extent necessary. Ah! these, I see, are several letters of mine to you, merely on business-matters. And here is your French passport: hair, brown—eyes, blue—stature, tall—the least thing stout—and so on. Very good! We will now put up these papers again; and you can keep them. If I have looked over them, it was as a mere matter of form—and nothing else."

"Of course, my dear sir," answered Lettice, infinitely relieved when this new ordeal was over, "you are bound to conduct the affair in a business-like way. And now, with your permission, I will retire to rest: for I feel much fatigued."

Mr. Pollard rang the bell; and the summons was immediately answered by Mrs. Webber, who had not long re-entered the house after her meeting with Barney the Burker. She was totally unaware that any one had been admitted during her temporary absence; and she was therefore smitten with astonishment on finding her master seated with a lady. As a matter of course she at once concluded that this must be Mrs. Rayner; and quickly recovering her self-possession, she assumed an air of placid benignity, as if pleased that the long-expected one should have come at last.

"This is Mrs. Rayner," said the old miser to his housekeeper; "and thus by her presence are all apprehensions for her safety set at rest. Have the goodness to conduct Mrs. Rayner to the chamber prepared for her reception. Good night, Louisa."

"Good night, my dear sir," answered Lettice: and she then followed Mrs. Webber from the room.

A few minutes afterwards the housekeeper returned to the parlour, to make the usual inquiry as to whether her master needed anything more ere she retired for the night; and the response being in the negative, she withdrew.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE STRONG ROOM.

It was now close upon ten o'clock; and the old miser proceeded to the strong room,—which, as the reader will recollect, also served him as a bed-chamber. He had to part on the following day with the sum of three thousand pounds; and though it was not his own money, yet there was something gratifying in the possession of it. He loved to feast his eyes on masses of shining gold—that gold which was the idol of his egotistic worship! On the very day that Mrs. Rayner attained her majority, he had drawn the sum of three thousand pounds from his banker, and had deposited it in his iron safe. A large portion was in the yellow specie: the remainder in bank-notes. The old man now sat down at the table to count over those notes and that gold from which he was to part on the morrow. He experienced a feeling very closely bordering upon affliction at the prospect of having to separate himself from so large a sum: but yet not for a moment did he entertain the thought of self-appropriating it—nor did he regret having honourably performed the duties of guardianship in respect to that money and its rightful owner, whom he now supposed to be beneath his roof. But he sat down to count it, not merely to convince himself, for the tenth time since he had it in his possession, that it was correct—but likewise to have the gratification of fingering and contemplating it for the last time but one. We say *but one*, because the old man naturally expected that on the morrow he would have to count the money again when handing it over to its claimant—and *then* indeed for the last time!

Meanwhile Mrs. Webber had ascended to her own chamber, making her footsteps sound with unusual heaviness upon the stairs, and slamming the door of the room with a certain degree of violence—and all for the purpose of making the supposed Mrs. Rayner hear that she had thus sought her own apartment. There the treacherous housekeeper sat down for about a quarter of an hour,—retaining in her hand an old-fashioned silver watch which she possessed, and keeping her eyes fixed upon the dial. If we were to follow the train of her musings we should find that she was exceedingly well acquainted with the habits of her master, although she had been so short a time in his service: but then she had entered this service for a special object, and she had failed not to watch all his proceedings and acquire as deep an insight as possible into his habits and customs.

"He will sit down in his room for a good half-hour," she said to herself, "to look over his books, enter the transactions of the day, and sum up his profits before he barricades himself in for the night. At a quarter past ten precisely I am to give admission to Barney and Bill Scott: there will then be a good quarter of an hour to do the work. Yes—and it shall be done too, no matter this Mrs. Rayner's presence—it shall be done at any risk!"

While thus musing, Mrs. Webber continued to regard the minute-hand of her watch; and just as it marked twelve minutes past ten, she took off her shoes, opened the door very gently, and noiselessly crept down the staircase. Not a board creaked under her footsteps; and she was careful to prevent the rustling of her dress as she passed by Lettice Rodney's door. She carried no light in her hand; and thus, silent as a ghost—stealthy and mysterious as an evil spirit—in the deep darkness did she continue her way. She gained the ground-floor—she peeped through the keyhole of the strong room—and thence she proceeded to the kitchen. Cautiously opening the back door, she put on her shoes again and issued into the yard. The back gate was speedily unfastened—and two persons, who were lurking in readiness there, passed into the premises. These were Barnes and his delectable acolyte Bill Scott. Mrs. Webber led them into the kitchen; and there she struck a light,—placing her finger upon her lips the moment the glare of the lucifer flashed upon the previous darkness.

"Hush!" she said in the lowest whisper: "we must be cautious—the lady is come."

"But has the old 'un paid her over the blunt?" inquired Barney with a look of apprehension.

"No—I am certain he has not," responded Mrs. Webber; "there are deeds to sign first of all—or rather it was intended there should be," she added, with a glance of diabolical significancy.

"Ah! but they won't be, though," rejoined Barney the Burker, his own looks full of a still more hideous and terrible meaning. "I say, by the bye, when I think of it—did I understand you just now, marm, that you mean to cut away from the house directly the business is done?"

"To be sure," answered Mrs. Webber,—"when the swag is properly divided. But of course we shall all three go different ways—and you may depend upon it that though an old woman, I shall keep on the tramp the whole night, and then get up to London to-morrow in the best way that I can."

"But there'll be a terrible hue and cry," remarked the Burker, "and it won't do for you to think of laying concealed at Jack Smedley's house ——you'll be sure to get nabbed."

"And I don't mean anything of the sort," answered the vile woman: "I shall get over to France, and never come back to England again. But we must not stand gossiping here: we must get to work."

"Here's the tools," said the Burker, with a grin, as he produced a long dagger from one pocket and a pistol from the other—while Bill Scott also displayed a couple of pistols. "But this is the thing that we must do the business with," added Barney, as he restored the pistol to his pocket and felt the point of the dirk with his forefinger.

"Come," said Mrs. Webber; "and mind if Mrs. Rayner up-stairs happens to overhear a noise —if there is any struggling on the old man's part and she gets alarmed and comes down or cries out——"

"Then we must do *her* business also," interrupted the Burker, with a ferocious look.

Mrs. Webber nodded with approving significancy; and as a thought struck her, she said, "As I came down stairs, I peeped through the keyhole and saw the old man sitting with his back to the door. If we should be lucky enough to find him in the same position now, the work will be easy enough; for he is too deaf to hear the door opening or to catch the sound of your footsteps. But you had better both of you take off your shoes."

This counsel was at once followed by the Burker and Bill Scott; and Mrs. Webber, with the light in her hand, now led the way from the kitchen. On reaching the passage where the door of the strong room was, she deposited the candle upon a step of the staircase, and then peeped through the keyhole. As her countenance was again turned towards her two villanous accomplices, its expression of fiendish satisfaction made them aware that circumstances continued favourable to their murderous project.

Mrs. Webber now proceeded to raise the latch of the door as noiselessly as she possibly could; and as she gently opened it, Barney and Bill Scott beheld the old man seated with his back towards them. He had on his dressing-gown, and was placed in an arm-chair at the head of the table. A single candle lighted the scene within the room: its beams were reflected by the yellow gold which the miser was counting. A couple of bags were likewise in front of him—as well as an open account-book, which showed the precise state of Mrs. Rayner's affairs, calculated and balanced to the minutest fraction. So absorbed was Anthony Pollard in his task, that even if he had been less deaf than he was, he would perhaps have still failed to hear the opening door or the tread of the murderers' steps—shoeless and stealthy—that were approaching from behind.

Barney the Burker advanced first, with his long sharp dagger in his hand: Bill Scott was immediately behind him, grasping a pistol to be used in case of emergency. Mrs. Webber remained at the door,—behind which she half concealed herself; for though iniquitous enough to play her part in the cold-blooded deed, she nevertheless instinctively recoiled from its too near contemplation. Stealthily advanced the Burker towards the unsuspecting old miser; and when at the back of his chair, the villain's dagger was raised to deal the murderous blow. At that very instant Mrs. Webber gave a start; and the word "Hush!" being almost involuntarily uttered, sounded audibly from her lips. Bill Scott, instantaneously catching it, laid his hand upon the Burker's shoulder to make him aware that there was something wrong, at the same time that he glanced back towards Mrs. Webber. But it was too late! —the diabolic galvanic force was already in the Burker's arm—the weapon was descending with a terrific power—deep down did it plunge between the shoulders of the unfortunate old man—a groan burst from his lips—and he fell forward a corpse, with his head upon the table.

"It was nothing, after all," said Mrs. Webber, the instant the blow was dealt. "I thought I heard some one moving about up-stairs."

But here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, to return to Lettice Rodney. It will be remembered that when Mrs. Webber was summoned to the parlour in order to conduct Lettice to her chamber, she was seized with astonishment on finding that her master was not alone, and that the lady whom she took to be Mrs. Rayner, had been admitted during her temporary absence from the house. That look had troubled Lettice: her guilty conscience instantaneously suggested a cause of apprehension. Perhaps this old housekeeper had been for years in Mr. Pollard's service—perhaps she had known the veritable Louisa—and perhaps she was now stricken with astonishment on beholding in the supposed Mrs. Rayner a person so different from what she had expected to see, and from what the little Louisa was likely to have grown up into? Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through Lettice Rodney's mind; and a cold terror thrilled through her form. She had nevertheless a sufficiency of self-possession still remaining to avoid the betrayal of what she felt; and she followed Mrs. Webber to the bed-room prepared for her reception. Mrs. Webber was considerably disconcerted by the arrival of the supposed Mrs. Rayner, and was apprehensive lest the murderous plot could not now be carried out. A portion of what she felt was reflected in her looks; and Lettice, being herself keenly and poignantly on the watch, saw that there was something strange and peculiar in the way that the housekeeper surveyed her. Still interpreting matters according to her own alarms, her former suspicion seemed to be strengthened: namely, that Mrs. Webber had a misgiving in respect to her identity with Mrs. Rayner. She longed to lead the old woman into conversation, to ascertain if her fears were really well founded: but the words she would have spoken appeared to stick in her throat, and she could not give utterance to a single syllable.

"Is there anything you require, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Webber, with a certain constraint, in consequence of what was passing in her own mind.

"Nothing," replied Lettice, her tongue now unloosening; and then she muttered a faint "Good night," which Mrs. Webber did not catch, and therefore did not respond to—but quitted the room with the impression that the lady was a proud, haughty, and reserved being who did not choose to enter into any discourse with her.

That constraint with which the housekeeper had spoken, and which, as the reader has seen, in reality arose from the state of her own guilty feelings,—was, under a similar influence, interpreted by Lettice into a studied coolness on the old woman's part; so that when Mrs. Webber had retired, Lettice flung herself upon a chair in an awful dismay, murmuring, "I am suspected—I shall be discovered—this woman is evidently more than half convinced that I am an impostress! At all events she will give some hint to her master to put him upon his guard: he will question me more closely than he otherwise would have done—he will purposely speak to me of things concerning which I cannot possibly give an answer——I shall be detected—exposed—sent to prison—tried—transported—or perhaps hanged!"—for the young woman knew not very well which offences were capital or which were not; and her own terrors naturally made her see everything in the worst light.

She wrung her hands in despair: she bitterly repented of the course into which temptation had led her; and whereas until the last few minutes she had conceived her position to be entirely safe, she now felt astounded at what she looked upon as her egregious folly in having embarked in such an enterprise. She would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to be safe out of the house: a mortal terror was upon her: at one moment she shivered with a cold sensation—the next instant she felt as if her veins were on fire. But still recurred the question—what was she to do? To carry on the imposture now, appeared hopelessness itself—utter madness. While she sat in these painful meditations, she heard Mrs. Webber come stamping up the stairs, and then loudly closing the door of her room. The reader knows very well for what purpose this noise was made: but the conscience-troubled Lettice interpreted it through the medium of her own fears.

"The woman has been down," she said to herself, with anguish at the heart, "to tell her master that he is deceived; and she cannot conceal her own rage at the idea that there is an impostress in the house. Hence this stamping of the feet—hence this slamming of her door! Oh, what will become of me?"

Again the miserable Lettice wrung her hands despairingly,—when all in a moment the thought struck her that she might escape out of the house. Yes—if this were practicable, she would accomplish it! But what if the street-door were locked and the key taken out? Ah! then doubtless there would be some means of issue from the back part of the premises—or by the parlour-window——anything, so long as she could escape! And now, how thankful she was that her effects had been left at the railway-terminus: for perhaps there might be a very late train by which she could get off—or at all events there was sure to be a very early one in the morning—and she might be far away from Liverpool before her flight from the house should be discovered.

Having reflected upon all these things, Lettice Rodney determined to make her escape. She had not taken off her bonnet or shawl: she was therefore in readiness to depart without delay. But she thought to herself that it would be better to wait half-an-hour, and thus afford leisure to the other inmates of the dwelling (for she did not even know how many there might be, nor what number of servants the old miser kept) to sink into repose in their respective chambers. She waited accordingly; and it was a half-hour of painful suspense for her, because she was not as yet certain that she would after all be enabled to find an issue from the dwelling. She did not hear Mrs. Webber descend the stairs; and as the house appeared to continue quiet, she at length resolved to put her project into execution. Opening the door of her chamber, she stole forth: but on reaching the head of the staircase, she perceived a light glimmering below; and hastily retreating, closed the door again, more loudly than was consistent with caution. It was this sound which had reached Mrs. Webber's ears, and made her ejaculate "Hush!" just at the very instant that Barney the Burker was about to drive his dagger deep down between the shoulders of the victim. And it may be added that it was the candle which Mrs. Webber had placed upon the stairs, that had so terrified Lettice Rodney.

The murder was accomplished, as we have already described; and scarcely was the blow dealt, when the vile old housekeeper intimated to the two assassins that she had been disturbed by a false alarm.

"What was it you thought as how you heerd?" inquired the Burker.

"A door shutting up-stairs," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Then what if that lady as you spoke of, has been a-listening and heerd summut—and perhaps she don't dare come down, but will open her winder and speak to any one as goes by; so that in a few minutes the place'll be surrounded, the whole neighbourhood alarmed, and we have no more chance of getting clear off than a cat without claws in a partickler place."

Mrs. Webber's countenance grew full of dismay as she listened to this rapidly uttered speech on the Burker's part, and the tenour of which appeared indeed but too reasonable.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Bill Scott.

"By jingo! we must do for her also," ejaculated Barney, with a look of fiercest resolve. "Come, lead the way, old dame—and we'll look to the swag arterwards: *he* won't run off with it," added the ruffian with a look of horrible significancy towards the old miser's corpse, which was bending with its face down upon the table.

Meanwhile Lettice Rodney was a prey to the most terrible apprehensions,—her guilty conscience suggesting all kinds of alarms. She thought that the reason why there was a light still burning below, was because the officers of justice had been sent for and were waiting to take her into custody. There was madness in her brain: she flew to the window of her room with the idea of opening it and precipitating herself into the street: but no! she could not die thus horribly—or if she survived, find herself frightfully mutilated. Ah! all in a moment an idea struck her. What if she were to hasten down stairs—throw herself at the miser's feet—confess the trick—but beseech him to pardon her—and in return for his forgiveness she would give him such information as would enable him to keep the three thousand pounds for himself. She could tell him that his ward Mrs. Rayner was no more, and that she had perished in a manner which would prevent her heirs—if she had any by her own or her husband's side—from becoming acquainted with her death.

Swift as lightning did these ideas sweep through the brain of Lettice Rodney: but ere she descended to put her project into execution, she opened the door and listened. Ah! she heard voices talking below: they were indeed those of the wretches who were at the instant deciding upon the murder of herself: but she could not catch what they said—and she fancied that the officers of justice were perhaps already in the house. Oh! then she must beseech and implore a private interview with Mr. Pollard: it seemed to her the only method to save herself from destruction. Goaded well nigh to madness, the wretched young woman rushed down the stairs; and as, on reaching the lower flight, she beheld Mrs. Webber accompanied by two ill-looking fellows, her very worst fears seemed to be confirmed, and in her eyes the Burker and Bill Scott instantaneously took the aspect of constables.

"Spare—Oh! spare me!" she cried, frantically clasping her hands as she stopped short midway on the staircase: "I will confess everything! Oh, I know that I have been very guilty—but the temptation was so great! Let me see Mr. Pollard—and I will tell him something that shall induce him to forgive me!"

The reader may imagine how great was the astonishment of Mrs. Webber and her iniquitous accomplices on hearing these passionately vehement ejaculations from Lettice Rodney's lips. While on the one hand utterly at a loss to comprehend her, they nevertheless on the other hand heard enough to make them aware that she was completely unsuspicious of the crime which they had committed, and that she believed Pollard to be still in the land of the living, inasmuch as she was beseeching an interview with him. The three wretches exchanged bewildered looks with each other; and Lettice fancied that they were uncertain whether to grant her own prayer or to carry her off to gaol at once.

"Spare me—for heaven's sake spare me!" she exclaimed, descending the stairs; "and I will confess how I was led into this imposture!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, to whom these words were a revelation: "then, who are you?"

"My name is Lettice Rodney," replied the young woman: "I met Mrs. Rayner——"

"And you are *not* Mrs. Rayner?" said the housekeeper, in hurried inquiry.

"No—and *you* all along knew that I was not. Oh, there is Mr. Pollard——Gracious heavens!" screamed Lettice, as her eyes were riveted upon the dagger which still remained between his shoulders; and smitten with the horrible—the overwhelming conviction that murder had been done, she fell down senseless at the foot of the staircase.

"There let her be—we'll divide the swag and bolt," said the Burker; "it isn't worth while to do her a mischief any-how."

"Stop!" said Mrs. Webber, as an idea of devilish ingenuity flashed in unto her mind: "we may save ourselves from all danger—and I need not scamper out of the country over to France."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Burker and Bill Scott, as if both speaking in the same breath.

"Never do you mind," responded Mrs. Webber: "leave it all to me—I know what I am about. Take charge of the swag, Barney—I know I can trust you for my share—you'll get up to London as quick as you can, and you'll give it to my daughter Bab—but not to Jack, mind! not to Jack."

"All right, marm," responded the Burker. "Come along, Bill—and let's be off."

The three wretches—satisfied that Lettice Rodney was in a profound swoon, from which she would not very readily awaken—returned into the strong room; and the two men took possession of all the gold and bank-notes, with the exception of fifty sovereigns which Mrs. Webber desired them to leave as a means of enabling her to carry out the objects which she had in view. Barney and Bill Scott then took their departure by the same way in which they had entered,—Mrs. Webber carefully closing and securing the yard-gate as well as the back-door when they were gone. On re-entering the house, she found Lettice still lying insensible at the foot of the stairs: she approached the corpse of her master—took his purse from his pocket—put into that purse the fifty sovereigns which she had kept back—and then, while Lettice still continued in a state of unconsciousness, deposited the purse in the young woman's pocket.

This being done, Mrs. Webber opened the front door of the house and began screaming out, "Murder! help!" with all her might and main. The alarm spread like wildfire along the street—several persons rushed in—and as Lettice Rodney was startled back to life by the woman's cries, she found herself the object of execration and abhorrence on the part of a dozen individuals surrounding her——she was accused of murder!

No pen can describe the confusion, the horror, and the dismay which now prevailed in the miser's house. The neighbours were flocking in; and the spectacle of the corpse, bent motionless over the table, with the weapon sticking in the back, produced a fearful sensation.

"Murder!" cried Lettice, flinging around her wild and almost frenzied looks: "*I* commit murder! No, no—that abominable woman"—pointing to Mrs. Webber—"and the two villains who were with her——"

"Wretch!" exclaimed the housekeeper; "you know that you killed the poor old gentleman because he found out that you were a cheat—and you fell into a fit when, alarmed by the noise, I came down and discovered the dreadful deed."

Lettice was overwhelmed with the accusation: she strove to speak, but she could not—a faintness came over her—and she would have again fallen, had she not been supported by the arms of two police constables who now took her into custody. In this piteous condition, bordering upon unconsciousness, she was borne away to the station-house, followed by a concourse of persons, all under the influence of dread horror at the deed which had been committed, as well as of amazement that one so young, so beautiful, and so genteel-looking should have committed such a stupendous crime.

On reaching the station-house, Mrs. Webber preferred the charge—but was continuously interrupted by the passionate, frenzied, and vehement ejaculations of Lettice Rodney. The latter was searched; and the purse, containing the fifty pounds, was found upon her. This was proclaimed to be the old miser's purse, not merely by Mrs. Webber, but by the butcher, the baker, the grocer, and other tradesmen, with whom the deceased had been accustomed to deal, and who were now present while the charge was being preferred. As a matter of course no one believed the unfortunate Lettice Rodney's vehement averment of innocence and counter-accusation in respect to Mrs. Webber: she was consigned to a cell, where she passed the remainder of the night in a condition of mind bordering upon utter distraction.

In the morning Lettice Rodney was placed before the magistrate, charged with the murder of Anthony Pollard. Meanwhile her boxes had been taken possession of at the railway-station by the police; and some letters were therein found, proving that her name was Lettice Rodney. On her own person not merely the murdered man's purse was discovered, but also the packet of papers belonging to Mrs. Rayner. The evidence given by Mrs. Webber before the magistrate was to the following effect:—

"The late Mr. Pollard was guardian to a lady named Louisa Rayner, whom he had not however seen for many years. This lady recently attained her majority, and was expected by Mr. Pollard to pay him a visit and receive the funds that were due to her. Last evening the prisoner came to the house, announcing herself to be Mrs. Rayner; and she was at first believed to be what she thus represented herself. She had a long interview with my poor master; and about ten o'clock I went up to bed, leaving them together in the room where Mr. Pollard habitually sat. I did not immediately retire to rest, having needlework to do. Upwards of half-an-hour elapsed, when I heard the sounds of voices speaking very loud. I opened my door, and listened. My ears distinctly caught my master's voice bitterly upbraiding the prisoner as an impostress, and insisting upon knowing how she came to personate Mrs. Rayner, and how she got possession of her papers. There was a great deal of this language on my master's side, and much intercession on that of the prisoner. I heard Mr. Pollard threaten to give her into custody; and then the door of the room, which was previously open, was closed. I presumed it was for fear of alarming me; and I thought to myself that Mr. Pollard meant to forgive her if she would confess everything. Presently it struck me that I heard a cry—or rather a deep moan;—then the door was opened again—and feeling a certain degree of uneasiness, I hastened down stairs. The prisoner was in the passage: she looked dreadfully confused on beholding me—and as I glanced in at the door, I was filled with horror and dismay on beholding a dagger sticking in my master's back. I seized upon the prisoner, calling her a murderess; and she fainted. The dagger belonged to my master: he was afraid of thieves and kept it for his defence. When sitting in that room at night-time, he generally laid it on the table near him: so that I have no doubt the prisoner snatched it up and used it suddenly."

While Mrs. Webber was making this deposition, Lettice Rodney passed through all the extremes of feeling of which the human heart is susceptible,—at one time crushed down by the weight of fearful consternation, at another giving vent to the most passionate declarations of innocence, as well as of accusations against Mrs. Webber herself,—now imploring heaven to interfere in her behalf, then appealing to the justice of man,—now confessing herself to be guilty of the intended cheat, but repudiating with abhorrence the graver and blacker charge,—then bursting forth into a paroxysm of the wildest anguish—and then sinking down into a numbed stupor, until suddenly starting up again in a fresh frenzy of words, looks, and gesticulations.

When asked, with the usual caution, whether Lettice had anything to say in her defence, she spoke with so much incoherence, that it was scarcely possible to unravel her words and obtain therefrom a continuous narrative. The magistrate was however patient; and after much trouble, her story was elicited. She told how she had fallen in with Mrs. Rayner, and explained the circumstances under which she was led to undertake the imposture: she told likewise how she had discovered the murder, and seen Mrs. Webber with the two men;—but no one believed this portion of her tale. The purse had been found upon her and then too she had her bonnet and shawl on when captured—which seemed to corroborate Mrs. Webber's account of a protracted interview with the old man: while the unfortunate young woman's own explanation of an intended flight from the house, was regarded merely as an excuse to account for the circumstance of her being thus dressed in all the apparel in which she had first arrived at the dwelling.

The magistrate had but one duty to perform—one course to pursue; and this was to commit Lettice Rodney for trial at the next assizes, on the charge of murdering Anthony Pollard.

CHAPTER XL.

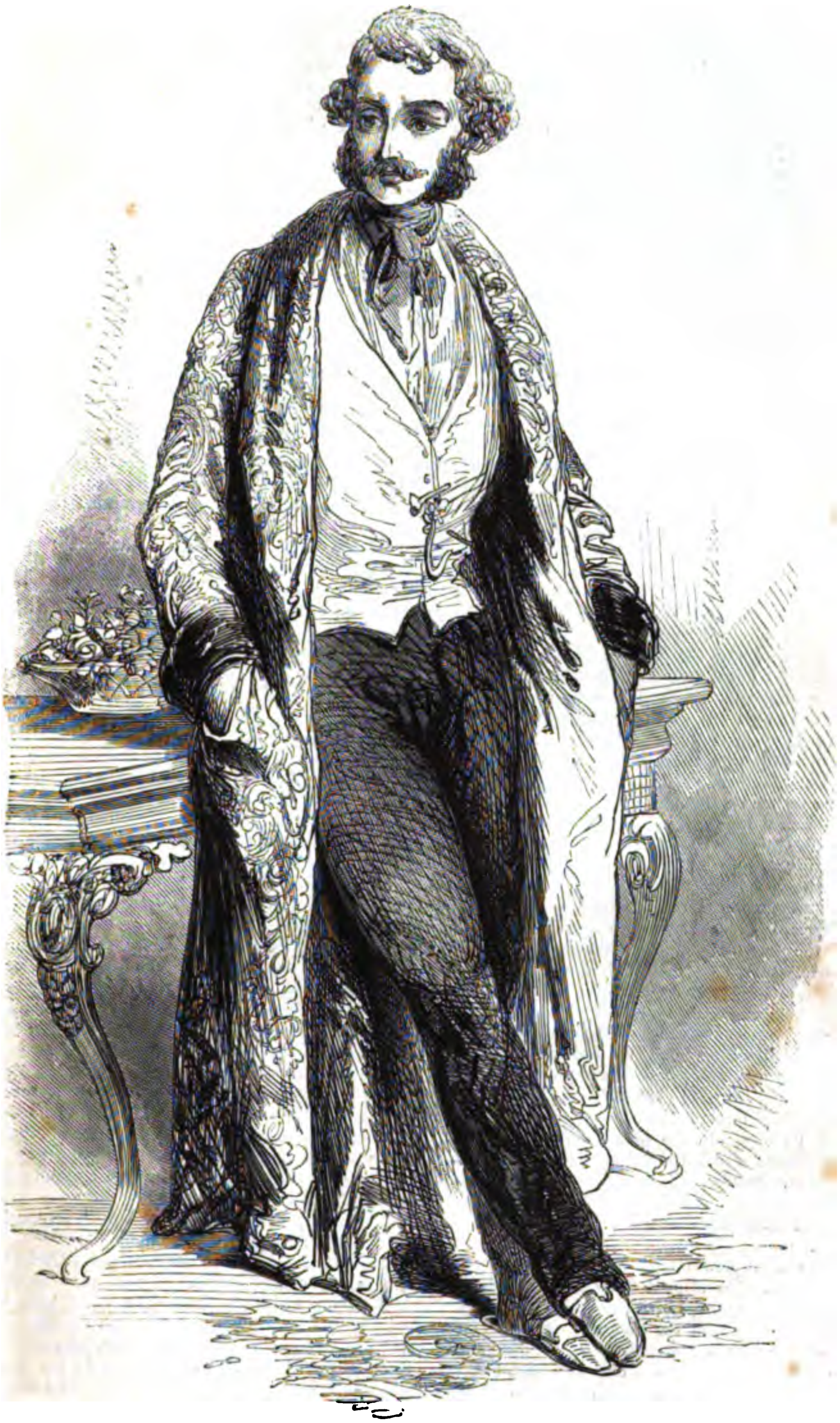
THE DUCAL SECRETARY.

Christian Ashton entered upon his duties as private English secretary to the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha; and a week passed, during which he gave his Royal Highness the utmost satisfaction. In the meantime he had become acquainted with all the noblemen and gentlemen forming the suite of that most illustrious prince; and perhaps the reader may wish to know a little more of these same German worthies.

They were eight in number,—delighting in names as euphonious to pronounce as they were easy to spell; and these shall be enumerated. Firstly, there was Count Wronki, who filled the office of Lord Steward, and whose chief avocation appeared to be in giving as few orders as possible and keeping down the hotel expenses to the utmost of his ability. The reader is already aware that the taciturn Chevalier Gumbinnen occupied the high post of Lord Chamberlain, with which was combined that of principal Lord of the Bedchamber: but if this latter office included the care of the Duke's wardrobe, it was very nearly a sinecure,—for a single portmanteau of small dimensions could without difficulty contain all the coats, waistcoats, and trousers which his Royal Highness possessed; and as for the linen, when there were half-a-dozen shirts in use and half-a-dozen more at the washerwoman's—applying the same estimate also to false collars, handkerchiefs, and stockings—the amount of this great prince's under-garments was not of an extent to require a great deal of supervision. Baron Raggidbak was the Groom of the Stole—the precise duties of which office Christian Ashton was at a loss to comprehend; unless indeed they consisted in the eating and drinking of all that his lordship could by any means get hold of—lounging away his time—reading newspapers—or quarrelling with a comrade over a game of *picquet* for sixpenny stakes. The Chevalier Kadger was the Equerry; and he was in almost constant attendance upon his Royal Highness: but his leisure time was expended in smoking full-flavoured Cubas, and in renewing the odour of garlic and rum which he seemed to make it a rule to carry about with him. Then there was General Himmelspinken, who filled the office of Master of the Horse: but this—at least in England, whatever it might have been in Germany—was an unmistakable sinecure: for the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had not brought over with him so much as a donkey, much less a horse; and one of the Queen's carriages was every day sent from Buckingham Palace to convey his Royal Highness to Court, or out for an airing, or to visit the public buildings, and so forth. Baron Farthenless held the office of Privy Purse; and Christian could not help thinking that the name of this functionary was most unfortunately ominous in respect to the state of the ducal exchequer. One thing he noticed—which was that Baron Farthenless took immense care of the Duke's plate,—only giving it out when his Royal Highness dined at the hotel, but never opening the chest for its display on the dinner-table of the ducal suite when his Royal Highness banqueted at the palace or elsewhere. Another high official was Herr Humbogh—whose name was pronounced just like that word which Englishmen are accustomed to ejaculate when expressing a derisive incredulity of anything which they hear, or when denouncing an imposture, a quackery, or a cheat. This gentleman was denominated the Privy Seal: his duties were light and pleasant, as well as easily performed, and with but little responsibility,—being limited indeed to the careful keeping of an old brass seal on which the ducal arms were emblazoned, and the value of which as a piece of metal might be about three-halfpence. The mention of Count Frumpenhausen will complete this aristocratic category,—his lordship bearing the title of Gold Stick, and his duty being to carry a brass-headed cane on those occasions when his ducal master was graciously pleased to grant an audience to English noblemen and gentlemen who called to pay their respects to the reigning Sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha.

But though any one of such English noblemen and gentlemen could, without much inconvenience to his own finances, have drawn a cheque upon his banker for an amount that would have purchased all the personal property possessed by the Duke and his entire suite,—yet such is the servile, grovelling, lickspittle character of the higher and middle orders of the English, that the profoundest respect was paid by all visitors to this trumpery Duke and the beggarly, half-starved horde of rapacious Germans that he had brought over with him. It was however sufficient that he was nearly related to Prince Albert—that he bore a ducal title—and that he was an independent Sovereign (in the pay of Russia and Austria)—it was sufficient, we say, that he was all this to ensure for him the reverential devotion of those scions of the British aristocracy and gentry who flocked to Mivart's to pay their court.

When the week had expired, and Christian was about to take his departure at five o'clock—his usual hour—he looked about for Baron Farthenless, to whom he was directed to apply for his salary. He could not however find the Privy Purse in any one of the suite of rooms occupied by his Royal Highness and his retinue: but in the ante-chamber he found all the other noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal household assembled together. It immediately struck Christian that these also were waiting for the Privy Purse, in order to receive such moneys as might be due to them; and yet, on a second thought, he repudiated the idea as something too preposterous, that such high and mighty functionaries could possibly receive weekly salaries.



THE HON. WILSON STANHOPE.

He did not want his own money, as he had plenty of funds at his disposal: but the warning given him by the friendly-disposed waiter had rendered him determined to look after that which was his due; for he thought it by no means improbable that Baron Farthenless might endeavour to cheat him out of it—an opinion to which he was more or less justified in arriving, inasmuch as during the week he had seen but too many instances of the dirty meanness and paltry expedients to which the members of the ducal retinue had recourse for obtaining wines, cigars, spirits, and other things beyond the limit of their actual allowances.

"What for you sall be waiting, yong mans?" inquired Baron Raggidbak, taking our hero aside and speaking to him in a confidential whisper.

"I am waiting to see Baron Farthenless," answered Christian. "Does your lordship shortly expect him?"

"Yes — I suspects him in one — two — tree minute. He am gone for to go to de palace to see de Prince; and he come back vare soon wid de moneys."

"Gone to the palace to get money of the Prince?" ejaculated Christian, thus giving involuntary utterance to his amazement.

"Yes, begar!" responded Raggidbak. "De vare goot Prince Albert sall act as——how you call it?——Oh! de banker of de Duke all de times we sall be in England. I waiting too for de moneys. I vare rich man in mine own country—vare rich: but me forgot to bring over wid me de tousand pounds which I was meant for to do. Have you got such a ting, yong mans, as six shilling in your pocket?—and we sall drink one bottle of de wine till de Baron sall come back."

Christian was determined not to be mulcted a second time by Baron Raggidbak; and so he gave an evasive response,—whereat his lordship looked deeply indignant and turned haughtily away, playing with his gilt brass watch-chain.

Almost immediately afterwards Baron Farthenless made his appearance; and then Christian was surprised to see how the noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal retinue crowded around the Privy Purse,—surveying him with looks of eager inquiry, and ready to stretch forth their dirty hands with hungry avidity to clutch whatsoever spoil he had to place at their disposal. And spoil it really was,—spoil wrung from the overtaxed industry of the working classes, and which, though by Act of Parliament passing through the hands of a naturalised foreign Prince, was thus destined to find its way into the pockets of these German cormorants whom the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had brought over with him. Christian was infinitely disgusted; and as soon as he had received his own salary, he took his departure.

We must now observe that during the week which had thus elapsed since he entered into the service of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, he had every day seen the beautiful Isabella Vincent—but only for a few minutes at a time; and on no occasion to enter into discourse with her, save in the presence of Mr. or Mrs. Chubb. His interest in the charming girl could scarcely be said to have increased—for it had already reached the point at which it had become the purest and sincerest love. But he saw that some mystery enveloped her; and he was curious to fathom it.

On returning to his lodging, between five and six o'clock in the evening, after receiving his salary from Baron Farthenless, he found a well-dressed but by no means agreeable-looking man knocking at the door of Mr. Chubb's house. The summons was not immediately answered; and Christian accordingly waited on the steps with this individual,—who surveyed him, as he thought, in a rather suspicious manner. He was a person of about forty years of age—by no means good-looking—clothed in black—and exhibiting great neatness and carefulness of toilet. Presently the door opened; and the servant-girl, evidently recognising the visitor, conducted him into the parlour—while Christian repaired to his own room.

About half-an-hour afterwards, Mrs. Chubb made her appearance before her youthful lodger; and he at once saw by her countenance that something had troubled her. This countenance of her's was never the sweetest in its expression; and therefore when anything did transpire to put her out, it was vixenish and disagreeable to a degree.

"I am come, Mr. Ashton," she said, "to beg that you will suit yourself with other apartments as soon as possible—this very evening, if so be you can; and in course, if you insist upon it, I sha'n't claim the week's rent which is due, because I am not giving you a week's notice."

"But what is the meaning of this?" inquired Christian, perfectly astonished as well as hurt by the suddenness of the proceeding.

"Never mind, sir! I have got no explanations to give—leastways there is no call to have any words about it: but as a gentleman I trust you will do me this faviour at once."

"Mrs. Chubb," answered Christian, half indignant and half remonstrating, "it is impossible you can treat me in such a manner without explaining your conduct. If my own behaviour has been improper or discourteous to yourself or any one beneath your roof——"

"Well, sir," interrupted Mrs. Chubb, softening somewhat, "there's no fault to find with your conduct: you're a gentleman; and you behaved as sich. But I do beg this faviour at your hands; and, in course, if in taking another lodging you refer to me I shall say all that's good and proper. Pray don't press me any farther, there's a dear young gentleman: but see about moving at once."

"It is totally impossible that I can find another lodging this evening," answered Christian, cruelly annoyed and perplexed: "but after the way in which you have just spoken to me, I certainly feel myself bound to leave to-morrow."

"Well, sir, I must make that do," responded Mrs. Chubb; "and thank'ee kindly."

Thereupon she quitted the room; and Christian was left to deliberate upon all that had occurred. Was it on Isabella's account that he had received this notice?—was that man whom he had encountered at the street door, in any way connected with her? He hoped not: for there was something in the look of that individual which he by no means liked—a certain sinister expression which appeared to indicate hypocrisy, cunning, and other debasing sentiments. He now longed to obtain a few minutes' private discourse with Isabella. The thought of separating from her had led him to the sudden comprehension of the feeling which he entertained on her behalf: he saw that it was not a mere friendly interest: a secret voice, whispering in his soul, told him that it was love. But how obtain a private interview with Isabella?—and even if he succeeded, what did he purpose to say? He knew not; and yet he felt how impossible it was for him to go elsewhere without exchanging another syllable with that beauteous creature. He sat with his door ajar, in the hope that he might hear her issue forth from the front parlour,—in which case he would go and meet her in the passage at any risk. But no: the opportunity served not—the time passed—and at ten o'clock he heard Miss Vincent ascending to her own chamber, Mrs. Chubb closely following.

Christian passed an almost sleepless night: he rose early in the morning—and at nine o'clock was compelled to sally forth and search for another lodging before he proceeded to Mivart's Hotel to enter upon his day's duties. He was not long in finding suitable apartments: he gave a reference to Mrs. Chubb, and intimated that he should take possession of the rooms in the evening. Then, with a heavy heart, he repaired to the hotel; but during the hours that he was engaged in his avocations, he was abstracted, and performed them only in a sort of mechanical manner.

At five he retraced his way to Mr. Chubb's, wondering whether he should be enabled to obtain a few minutes' interview with Isabella,—in which case he was more than half resolved to throw himself at her feet and avow his love: for it had now assumed all the pure passion and chaste fervour of romance. But as he entered the street, he beheld a carriage, with livery servants in attendance, standing at the door of the parish clerk's house: a man came out, leading Isabella by the hand—and that man was the same with the sinister countenance, whom Christian had seen on the preceding day. He assisted Isabella to enter the carriage,—he himself immediately afterwards ascending to the box, and taking his seat as a menial or dependant by the side of the fat, gorgeously liveried, powdered coachman. The equipage drove away in the contrary direction from that whence Christian was advancing; and he stopped short, smitten with grief, as well as with a bewilderment amounting almost to dismay. Isabella was gone: she had not observed him—or if she did notice his presence in the street, she had not dared bestow even a parting look upon him:—she was gone, and she was borne away under circumstances which only added to the mystery already enveloping her. She had taken her departure in a splendid equipage; and the man who had come to fetch her, was evidently a menial. If Christian's soul were susceptible of any consolation under this infliction, it was to be found in the fact that his mind was relieved from the apprehension that the sinister-looking individual was in any way connected by the bonds of kinship with the beautiful Isabella.

For nearly a minute did the youth stand in the street, a dozen yards distant from the spot where the carriage had just driven off: he felt as if a dreadful calamity had suddenly overtaken him—as if a gulf had abruptly opened, separating him from the object of his love. At length he moved slowly onward to the parish-clerk's house: Mrs. Chubb herself answered his summons at the front-door, and begged him to step into the parlour.

"Well, Mr. Ashton," she exclaimed, "here's a pretty business! I've lost the young lady and the guinea a week that was paid for her board and lodging—and all through you!"

"Through me?" ejaculated our young hero: but his cheeks became the colour of scarlet—for he felt as if the keen eyes of the landlady were penetrating to the inmost recesses of his heart.

"Yes, to be sure—through you, Mr. Ashton!" she repeated: "leastways, on your account. I hadn't ought to have took you unbeknown to that there Mr. Gibson."

"And who is Mr. Gibson?" inquired Christian, who now thought he might possibly hear something in respect to the mystery which had appeared to envelope the object of his love.

"Why, Mr. Gibson is the person who put Miss Vincent with me and paid for her board and lodging."

"And how long had Miss Vincent been with you?"

"Not more than three months, or so," rejoined Mrs. Chubb; "and it is wery wexing that she should have gone like this. But who on earth she can be, I haven't no more idea than the man in the moon!"

"But it surely was not this Mr. Gibson's own carriage?"

"In course not!—or else he wouldn't have got upon the box. To think that Miss Vincent, who lived here for a guinea a week, should have had a carriage sent to fetch her away——"

"And where is she going to?" interrupted Christian, his heart palpitating with suspense as he awaited the reply.

"Ah! that's quite unbeknown to me," responded Mrs. Chubb. "Mr. Gibson was always precious close; and Miss Vincent herself never said a word about any relations or friends that she might have. But I always thought that there was some little mystery about the young lady. She lived for a long time with Mr. Hickman—our clergyman that was; and when he died it was through his widow's recommendation that Mr. Gibson put Miss Vincent with us—Chubb, you see, being parish-clerk."

"And how long did Miss Vincent live in the clergyman's family?" asked Christian.

"Very nigh two year," rejoined Mrs. Chubb. "She was fourteen years old when she was fust put in Mr. Hickman's family. She was in deep mourning—for her mother had just died; and I did hear it whispered that she was a lady of title—but I don't know how true it may be, for Miss Vincent never spoke to me about her family. And to tell you the truth, when Mr. Gibson put her here, he hinted that she was somewhat peculiarly sitiwated, and that me and Chubb was never to bother her with no questions."

"Then it would appear that this Mr. Gibson was only the agent for some one else?" remarked Christian: "and this some one else is evidently the person, whether gentleman or lady, to whom the carriage itself belongs. But what did you mean," he hesitatingly inquired, "by saying that it was through me you have lost her?"—and as Christian put the question, he felt a sad, sad tightening at the heart.

"Why, when Mr. Gibson came yesterday and saw you walk into the house, he asked me who you was; and I was obleeged to tell him that you was a lodger. He looked uncommon glum, and said that he thought as how he had put Miss Vincent into a house where there was no single men to talk nonsense to her and so on. So I told him that you was a very respectable and well-behaved young gentleman—that you was out nearly the whole day, and never saw Miss Vincent unless it was when happening to pass her in the passage or on the stairs. But still he wasn't satisfied; so then I said as how I know'd you was an obleeging young gentleman, and would leave at the shortest possible notice. Mr. Gibson looked better pleased, and went away; and then I thought it was all right. But, lo and behold! just as the clock strikes five this evening, up dashes the carriage to the door—in comes Mr. Gibson, and says that Miss Vincent is to go away with him directly. Her things was soon packed up; and off she went, only just a minute or two before you knocked at the door. So you see that Miss Vincent has got some good friends; or else she has had a sudden windfall and turned out to be a fine lady after all."

"And did she seem pleased," inquired Christian, "with the idea of going away?"

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Mrs. Chubb. "When Mr. Gibson had her fetched down—for she was up in her own room when he came—and told her she was to go away with him at once, she seemed struck all of a heap."

"Ah! she seemed vexed?" ejaculated Christian, eagerly.

"That she did," exclaimed Mrs. Chubb, not observing his excitement. "And I know what it was: she was sad at the thought of parting from me. You see, I was always very kind and good to her, though it was but a guinea a week as was paid for her keep. And now, Mr. Ashton, there's no longer any call for you to shift your lodgings; and as it's through you I've lost Miss Vincent, I hope you won't think of leaving me."

But Christian made her no answer—for the simple reason that he was not listening to the latter portion of her speech. His heart at the moment was a strange compound of joy and sorrow,—sorrow at the departure of the beauteous Isabella, and joy at the intelligence that she was sad when she left; for he knew full well that it could not be on account of separating from the parish clerk's wife, and a secret voice whispered in his soul that this sadness on Isabella's part was on account of himself. Youthful love is full of hope, and in imagination it triumphs over all obstacles: its fancy is so expansive that it even achieves impossibilities—levels the loftiest barriers and bridges the widest gulfs—until it beholds itself crowned with success. Such now was the case with Christian Ashton; and feeling assured that he was not altogether indifferent to the lovely Isabella, he clung to the hope that the progress of time and the flow of circumstances might lead them together to the altar.

"Why, what are you thinking about, Mr. Ashton?" exclaimed Mrs. Chubb.

"Thinking about?" ejaculated our hero, thus rudely startled up from a dreamy reverie. "Oh! I was thinking of all you have been telling me about Miss Vincent."

Mrs. Chubb repeated her request with regard to the lodgings; and Christian readily promised to grant it, on condition that she would go and make some befitting excuse for his not completing the bargain which he had half-settled in the morning with the other lodging-house-keeper. This little matter was speedily arranged; and our young hero accordingly kept his quarters at the parish clerk's house. But why did he do this after the unceremonious way in which he had been treated when it was thought expedient to get rid of him? Simply because he wished to remain at the place where Isabella had lived, and where it was possible, he thought, she might happen to call. But which of our readers, whether gentleman or lady, who knows what love is, can fail to penetrate our young hero's motives for tarrying at his present lodgings?

Another week passed away; and Christian, on proceeding, as usual, one morning at ten o'clock to Mivart's Hotel, found the utmost excitement prevailing amongst the ducal retinue: there was to be a grand review in Hyde Park that day, at which his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was to be present, and in honour of whom the military display was to take place. It was necessary that the Duke should be accompanied by his entire retinue; and therefore great preparations were in progress for the occasion. In the various rooms the high functionaries were issuing orders to the servants of the hotel: some of them were inspecting their best apparel (and heaven knows that bad was the best!)—while others were burnishing up their trumpery jewellery with pieces of wash-leather. Christian passed on to the little room in which he was accustomed to sit: but on opening the door, he stopped short in sudden dismay at the astounding spectacle which met his eyes. For there sat Baron Raggidbak, the Groom of the Stole, in his coat, waistcoat, boots, and shirt—but without his breeches: for his lordship was busily engaged in the more notable than dignified task of mending a rent in the seat of those very pantaloons of which he had divested himself!

No wonder that Christian stopped short: but the Baron started up in a towering rage, exclaiming, "Der deyvil! why for, yong mans, you go for to come in widout knocking at de door?"

Christian's only reply was a peal of laughter at the ludicrous figure presented to his view by his lordship Baron Raggidbak, Groom of the Stole to the high and mighty reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His lordship gnashed his teeth with rage, and endeavoured to slip on his pantaloons with all possible despatch: but in his confusion and haste he thrust his right boot through the half-mended rent—and losing his balance, sprawled upon the floor. Christian now felt concerned on the poor devil's behalf; and not wishing to add to his embarrassment, precipitately retreated, closing the door. He thought of repairing to the ante-chamber and waiting there until Baron Raggidbak should leave the secretary's room free for his use. Again he passed through the midst of the greater portion of the ducal retinue; and on entering the ante-chamber somewhat hastily, he surprised the Chevalier Kadger in the act of putting on his military frock coat,—when, to his renewed amazement, Christian discovered that this high official, the principal

Equerry to the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wore no shirt! He had on a flannel jacket, which had certainly seen a couple of months' wear without being changed; and it was therefore pretty evident that either the Chevalier Kadger's wardrobe was singularly deficient, or else that he had entirely lost the confidence of his washerwoman.

The Equerry, turning his back towards Christian, made all possible haste to hook his frogged and braided coat, which, as it fastened close up to the chin, effectually concealed that little trifling deficiency in the linen department which had betrayed itself to our young hero's knowledge. At this moment the Chevalier Gumbinnen, Lord Chamberlain and Principal Lord of the Bed-chamber, came rushing into the ante-room,—where he pulled the bell violently. This exalted official in the service of an illustrious master seemed to be in as towering a rage as Baron Raggidbak was a few minutes before, when surprised in his airy condition and thrifty occupation: indeed, so much was the Chevalier Gumbinnen excited, that he did not notice Christian's presence. The furious summons of the bell was almost instantaneously answered by a waiter; and the Chevalier, grasping him by the arm, said, "De breeshes!"

The waiter shook his head in evident inability to comprehend the Chevalier's meaning.

"De breeshes!" repeated this functionary, in the highest state of excitement: and no wonder—for he had just used all the English that he knew, and was totally unable to express himself by another syllable of our vernacular.

The Chevalier Kadger, who had by this time finished buttoning up his coat, came to his friend's assistance: a few words were rapidly exchanged in German; and then the Chevalier Kadger, addressing himself to the waiter, said, "Mine goot mans, de Lord Chamberlain sall come for to ask for de breeshes of his Royal Highness."

Then, as the waiter stared in astonishment, the Chevalier Kadger proceeded to explain, in the best English he could possibly muster to his aid, that the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha's best pantaloons had been sent on the previous day to the tailor to have stripes of gold-lace sewn upon the legs—that the pantaloons aforesaid had not come home—and that his Royal Highness was kept waiting in the cold, in his shirt, for these identical breeches, without which it would be exceedingly inconvenient, not to say impossible, for the illustrious Sovereign to appear at the review. Such was the explanation of his Royal Highness's dilemma; and the waiter promised to send round at once to the tailor's for the missing pantaloons: but Christian observed that the man could scarcely repress a smile—while our hero himself had still more difficulty in keeping down an outburst of laughter.

Thinking that by this time Baron Raggidbak might have finished mending his own breeches, and that the secretary's room would be now disengaged, Christian was proceeding thither, when his attention was drawn to the explosion of a sudden altercation between General Himmelspinken and Count Frumpenhausen. The latter nobleman—who, be it remembered, was Gold Stick in Waiting—had fashioned for himself a very fine plumage with the feathers of a cock pheasant's tail; and he was just on the point of fastening his plume to the side of his hat with a brass brooch such as can be purchased in the Lowther Arcade for eighteenpence,—when General Himmelspinken snatched the plume away. Doubtless, as a military officer of high rank, and holding the eminent position of Master of the Horse, his Excellency the General conceived that he himself was the most fitting and proper person to wear the plume. Count Frumpenhausen however thought otherwise; and a violent dispute arose. The General, with the characteristic bravery of a true warrior, proceeded to protect his plunder by force of arms—or rather of fists; and he made a desperate onslaught on Count Frumpenhausen. The combat raged between the two; and while they were thus fighting, Herr Humbogh, the Privy Seal, walked quietly off with the plume: and seating himself at the farther end of the apartment, began attaching it to his own beaver, in the very place where the said beaver (which was a shocking bad one) was most battered. Count Wronki's interference put an end to the quarrel between the valorous General and the titled Frumpenhausen: but nothing could induce Herr Humbogh to deliver up the plume; and sticking his hat, thus decorated, on the side of his head, he strutted to and fro with such an air of defiance that neither of the two discomfited disputants dared approach him in a menacing manner.

With mingled feelings of disgust and amazement, yet entertwined with an almost irresistible sense of whatsoever was ludicrous in these proceedings,—Christian repaired to the secretary's room: but he found the door locked, and therefore naturally concluded that his lordship Baron Raggidbak had thus shut himself in to finish his task in peace and quietness. Our young hero accordingly returned to the ante-chamber, which he reached just at the moment the waiter was reappearing to report progress to the two Chevaliers in respect to the ducal inexpressibles. Christian therefore overheard the explanation. Gold-lace, it was represented, was exceedingly dear; and as the broadest stripes had been placed on his Royal Highness's pantaloons—besides the said pantaloons being re-seated—the cost thereof amounted to three guineas, which the tailor, without meaning any disrespect towards the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, would rather see paid before he delivered up the unmentionables. Christian could not help thinking that this was a pretty pickle for a reigning Duke to be placed in; and doubtless the two Chevaliers thought so likewise. They hastily conferred together in German for a few moments: then the Chevalier Gumbinnen, putting his hand into his pocket, drew forth eighteenpence—while the Chevalier Kadger, imitating his example, displayed three pence three farthings: but as these united sums were very far from making up the requisite amount, the faces of the two Chevaliers became exceedingly blank, and their manner singularly bewildered. At this crisis Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, appeared upon the scene; and Christian thought that no advent could possibly be more propitious than that of the high functionary who had charge of the ducal exchequer. But, alas! the Baron's name proved to be typical of his condition—namely, farthingless; and no money was therefore forthcoming. Christian—in spite of his resolves not to be fleeced by his German friends—now stepped forward; and addressing himself to the Chevalier Kadger, said in the most delicate manner, "I have some change at your disposal."

The amount was accordingly produced: the waiter sped off to procure the Royal pantaloons, which now quickly made their appearance, after the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had been kept precisely half-an-hour shivering in the cold for the want of them. Things progressed somewhat more comfortably now: the various toilettes were completed; and as noon approached, a sufficient number of horses arrived from Buckingham Palace for the accommodation of the Duke and his suite. A crowd was collected in the street to feast their eyes with the grandeur of the imposing procession; and his Royal Higness marched forth in all the glory of the inexpressibles which Christian Ashton's money had redeemed from pawn at the hands of the mistrustful tailor. Herr Humbogh looked splendid indeed with the plume of pheasant's feathers; and Baron Raggidbak's breeches held firmly together as his lordship mounted the steed allotted to his use. The other nobles and gentlemen of the suite were equally well pleased with their own toilettes; and as the sun was shining, its beams made all their worthless jewellery glitter like real gold. The ducal *cortege* passed away amidst the cheers of the multitudes, who little suspected what sort of persons they were on whom they thus bestowed their applause. And here we may add that the mistrustful tailor, who would not give the German Sovereign credit for three guineas, forthwith ordered the arms of that selfsame sovereign to be fixed above his shop-door; and on the strength of the three guineas' worth of work which he had done, he wrote himself up, "Tailor, by Appointment, to his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

Before concluding this chapter, we will take the liberty of drawing one moral from the incidents we have related: which is, that gathered crowds, instead of thoughtlessly and giddily bestowing their cheers upon royal and aristocratic personages simply because they bear royal and aristocratic titles, should pause to ask themselves whether these personages, by their own merits, deserve the homage thus shown them and the plaudits thus showered upon their heads?

CHAPTER XLI.

THE REVIEW.

The Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had signified to Christian through Count Wronki, who signified the same through the Chevalier Gumbinnen, who delivered the message through the Chevalier Kadger, that he might take a holiday on this grand occasion. Our hero accordingly resolved to see the review; and he bent his way towards Hyde Park for the purpose.

It is not our intention to enter into descriptive details with regard to the spectacle: suffice it to say that the large enclosure of the Park was occupied by the troops as well as by a large crowd of spectators. Immense numbers of carriages thronged in the drive,—some containing elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen—but most of them being empty, their owners preferring to enter the enclosure upon foot, in order to obtain a nearer view of the military proceedings. Prince Albert and several English generals, attended by "a brilliant staff"—to use the invariable newspaper phrase—were present; but as a matter of course, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was the lion of the occasion; and the public journals of the following day spoke of this illustrious Prince as being attended by "a splendid retinue of all the great dignitaries of his household." It was however somewhat difficult to conceive by what possible means the reporters could have become so enamoured of Herr Humbogh's plume, Baron Raggidbak's pantaloons, or in short of any portion of the toilet of the Ducal suite. But perhaps, like theatrical properties, it all looked very well at a distance; and we know that the gentlemen of the daily press do not choose to be hypercritical in any matter where Royalty or Royalty's adherents are concerned.

Christian mingled with the crowd, and looked about to see whether his sister, with Lady Octavian Meredith, was present. He however saw nothing of them; and at length getting wearied of the scene, began to think of departure. He had gained the outskirt of the crowd, when he beheld the Honourable Mr. Stanhope lounging along upon foot; and it was tolerably evident that this gentleman must have lunched well, for it was clear that he was labouring under the effect of copious potations. Not that he was so far intoxicated as to stagger about: but he was much excited, and with an impudent leer was regarding all the good-looking females who happened to come in his way. Christian felt an insuperable disgust for this man, with the villany of whose character he was so well acquainted; and as he beheld him rivet his insolent libertine looks upon several females who did not happen to have any male companions, he could scarcely restrain his indignation. All of a sudden he perceived an elegantly dressed young lady hastening along, and looking with a sort of wildness all about, as if she had by accident been separated from the friends who brought her thither, or else as if she were in search of some particular equipage amongst the countless vehicles which were drawn up three deep in the road against the wooden barriers. But now, as she drew nigh and Christian caught a glimpse of her countenance, how great was his surprise and joy on recognising the beautiful Isabella Vincent!

He was springing forward to greet her, and to ascertain wherefore she was thus looking confused and dismayed, when he beheld Wilson Stanhope accost her; and he evidently said something impudent—for Isabella flung upon him a look of dignified indignation, though at the same instant her countenance became crimson. This was sufficient—aye, and far more than sufficient to excite Christian to the extreme of irritation against that treacherous accomplice in the Duke of Marchmont's foul iniquity. With one bound Christian was upon the spot; and quick as thought Stanhope was levelled with the earth,—our young hero's hand dealing the blow which thus prostrated him.

"Heavens, Miss Vincent!" he ejaculated, instantaneously turning towards the young lady; "that ruffian dared insult you—as he once insulted my sister!"

But Isabella could not speak a word: she was so overwhelmed with confusion and affright. A crowd was gathering round the spot, and numerous voices ejaculated an approval of what our hero had done; for he was not the only one who had been observing Stanhope's insolent behaviour. As for this individual himself, he sprang to his feet and was about to give vent to bitter imprecations against the gallant one who had stricken him down; but recognising our young hero, he became speechless—was cowed and dismayed: for he had heard from Marchmont the *denoûement* of the plot at Oaklands, and how it had been so completely frustrated and exposed through Christian's instrumentality. A policeman quickly made his way through the crowd; and while Christian led Miss Vincent off, the bystanders acquainted the constable with Mr. Stanhope's insolent conduct, and how deservedly it had been chastised. It was evident too that Stanhope had been drinking; and the police-officer summarily ejected him from the park,—threatening to take him into custody if he dared offer the slightest resistance.

Meanwhile Christian, as already said, had hurried Isabella away; and the beautiful girl of sixteen clung to his arm as to that of a protector—or as a sister might to that of a brother. She was still so much under the influence of her agitated feelings as to be for the first few moments totally unable to give utterance to a word, or to express her gratitude to Christian otherwise than by a look; and in this there was a certain tenderness which though quite consistent with virginal modesty and maiden bashfulness, nevertheless seemed to confirm the youth's hope that he was not altogether indifferent to her. Nor did he immediately speak again, when thus leading her away from the crowd that had gathered on the spot where he so chivalrously vindicated her insulted innocence. There was a paradise of feeling in the youth's soul—a pure and holy ecstacy of the heart, which those who have loved well and fondly cannot fail to comprehend, and which was too deep for utterance. At length he said, in that low voice which invariably belongs to emotions so profound—so ineffably blissful, "Were you separated from your friends, Miss Vincent?—were you looking for any one?"

"Yes, Mr. Ashton," she answered. "But permit me to express all the gratitude——Ah! here he is!" she abruptly ejaculated.

At the same moment a tall, handsome, elegantly dressed young gentleman came hurrying towards them; and at the very first glimpse of that countenance of perfect manly beauty, Christian could not help experiencing a sudden pang which was very much like that of jealousy—if not jealousy, at all events a feeling of annoyance that another should have a right to claim the privilege of escorting the lovely Isabella.

"Why, how was it that we missed you?" exclaimed the handsome individual, gazing with astonishment when he thus perceived Miss Vincent leaning upon the arm of our hero—who was younger than himself, and in every degree as handsome.

"It was that sudden movement of the crowd," answered Isabella, "which caused such confusion where we were standing. And, Oh! I have been so insulted—and this gentleman," she continued, looking gratefully towards Christian, "conducted himself with so much generosity——"

"I most sincerely thank you," said the handsome personage, taking Christian's hand and pressing it warmly. "Pardon me if I be somewhat abrupt—but there are others close by who are uneasy on Miss Vincent's behalf——"

Thus speaking, he proffered his arm to Isabella,—by his manner and his unfinished speech showing that he was anxious to hurry her away. She shook hands with Christian; and with another look expressed her gratitude,—expressed it too with a slight tinge of tenderness, as much as a delicate-minded young lady could possibly display. Her companion bowed courteously: they hurried on in the direction of a carriage, in which a gentleman and lady were seated, but whose faces Christian could not obtain a glimpse of. Isabella and her companion at once entered this carriage, which immediately dashed away; and our hero saw that it was the same which had been sent a week back to convey Miss Vincent from Mrs. Chubb's house. He was half inclined to inquire of one of the lacqueys belonging to the other carriages whose equipage that particular one was; but they were all busy in leaping up to their places, for the throng of vehicles was being set in motion to take up their owners wheresoever they might be found, as the review was now over and the crowds were pouring out of the enclosure. Therefore Christian walked slowly away without putting the question; and in his heart there was a strange commingling of pleasurable and disagreeable sensations. The look of virginal tenderness which Isabella had thrown upon him, produced the former feeling: but on the other hand, he could not think with any degree of satisfaction, of the companionship in which he had left her—the companionship of that young, handsome, elegantly-dressed, and aristocratic-looking personage. Besides, it was but too evident that she had found either wealthy relatives or friends; and though in one sense he rejoiced that her position should be so suddenly improved, yet on the other hand he could not help thinking that this very improvement in her circumstances had opened an immense gulf between herself and him. Yet again did hope steal into his soul with a soothing and solacing effect,—that youthful hope which in the flight of fancy surmounts all barriers and overleaps all chasms, however high the former and however profound the latter.

Retracing his way slowly from Hyde Park, Christian wandered through the streets, reflecting on all that had occurred,—until he approached the tavern where he was accustomed to dine since he had lodged at Mrs. Chubb's, and for which an hour in the afternoon was allowed by his ducal employer. He entered the coffee-room of the tavern—seated himself at the table—and gave his orders to the waiter. The place was unusually crowded; and in the course of a few minutes another gentleman came and took a seat at the same table. He was a foreigner—bearded and moustached—well-dressed—and of good manners. Making Christian a bow with true continental politeness, he expressed a hope that he should not be inconveniencing him by sitting down at the same table. He spoke English with considerable fluency, though with a German accent: Christian at once set him at his ease in respect to the object of apology; and they soon got into a conversation together. After a few indifferent remarks, the German gentleman began to speak of the grand military spectacle in Hyde Park, and which it appeared he had witnessed.

"And I also saw it," responded our hero. "It was given in honour of one of your native princes, who was present with his retinue."

"Ah—his retinue," said the German, with a short dry cough: and then he drank his wine, but with a peculiar look as if he could say something if he chose.

Christian perceived what was passing in his mind; and being curious to glean all he could in respect to his German friends, he thought it more prudent to abstain from intimating that he himself held a temporary post in his Royal Highness's service.

"If it be not impertinent," he said, "do you come from that part of Germany in which the Duke's dominions are situated?"

"Ah bah! his dominions!" ejaculated the German, evidently no longer able to restrain himself: "pretty dominions indeed!—a few hundred acres! Why, you have plenty of noblemen and gentlemen in your country possessing estates any one of which is as large as the whole Duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Do you disparage your own native institutions?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"I hate and detest the institutions," responded the foreigner, with strong emphasis, "which have parcelled out that fine country into all these wretched trumpery principalities, miserable in extent and of the meanest poverty. I am for German nationality—Germany to be one and indivisible; and therefore you may readily conceive that I am no friend to its present partition. It is nothing but a nest of execrable despotisms—all the more execrable too, because so thoroughly paltry and insignificant. A traveller may contemplate with a certain reverential awe, even if not with love, a mighty chain of mountains that bars his way: but if he find himself stopped by a wretched ant-hill, he would be overwhelmed with shame and disgust—he would be shocked at his own miserable self-abasement at not being able to clear such a barrier. In the same way would he contemplate with awe the spectacle of a broad and ample river impeding his course: but what would be his feelings if he found himself compelled to stop short on the edge of a dirty and insignificant puddle! Thus is it with these paltry German despotisms, in comparison with the huge ones of other nations that I might name: and yet they all alike serve as barriers to human progress."

"It is true," said Christian, at once appreciating the truth of his companion's reasoning.

"And you will be all the more struck by what I have said," continued the latter, "when I inform you that I myself am a native of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and consequently a subject—bah, a subject!" he repeated with indescribable disgust—"of this very Duke in whose honour the grand review has to-day been held."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Christian, whose curiosity was all the more vividly excited because he saw that his German acquaintance had something yet to reveal. "Your conversation interests me much——"

"And I could, if I chose, astonish you more than I have interested you," interrupted the German: then, after a pause, he went on to say in a confidential manner and in a whispering tone, "I saw this precious retinue to which you just now alluded; and I recognised all the knaves composing it as well as I should recognise my own brother if he came into the room at this moment. Aye—and my blood boils with shame and indignation at the bare idea of the astounding cheat which is being practised upon the English people. All Germany is degraded, humiliated, and dishonoured by this fellow of a Duke who dresses up his lacqueys and bestows upon them titles of nobility which they only bear while in England, and which they will have to put off when they get back to Germany and return to the pantry, the stable, and the kitchen."

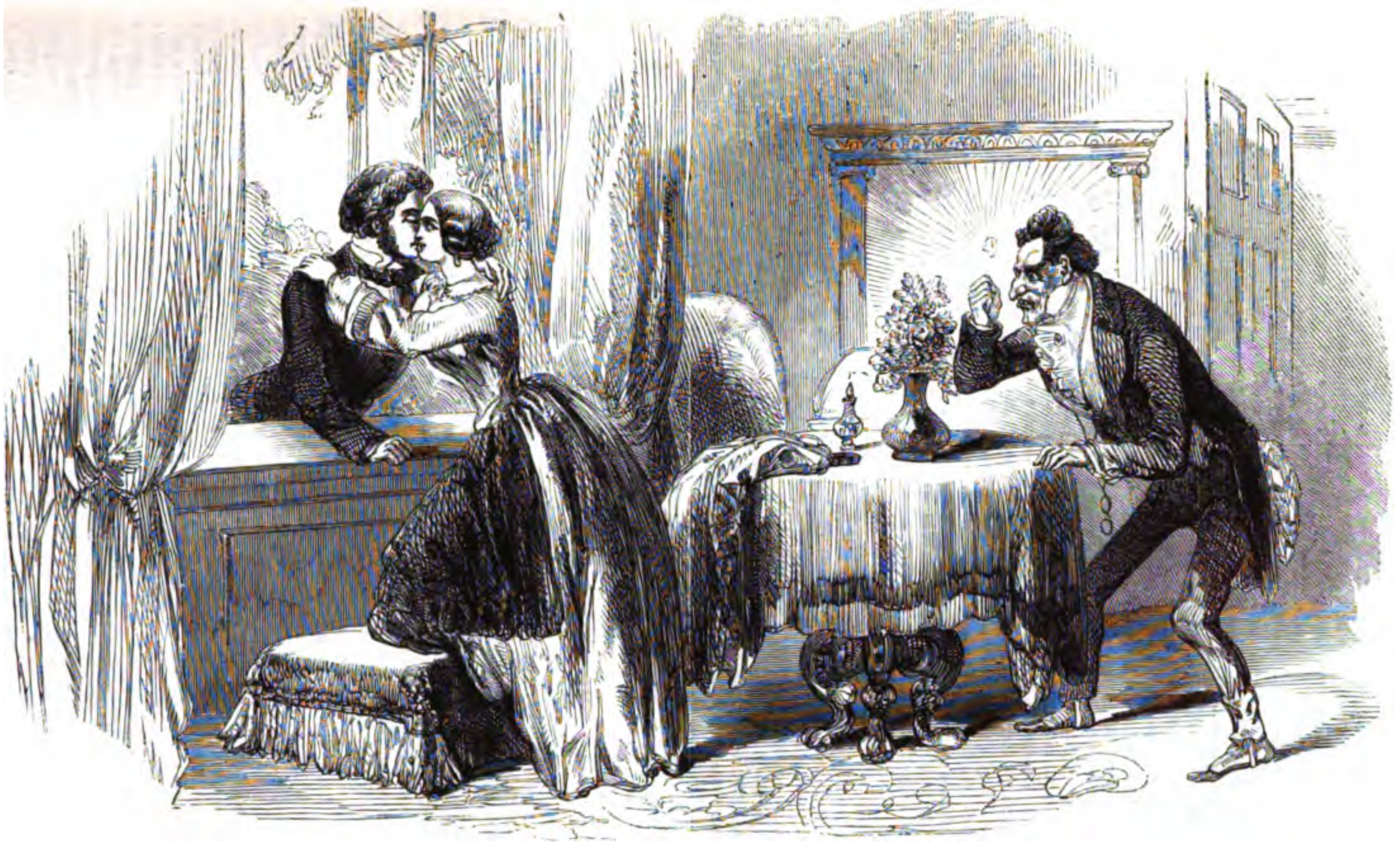
"Surely you are using some hyperbolic figure of speech?" exclaimed Christian, perfectly astounded at what he had just heard.

"No figure of speech at all," responded the German, who spoke with the concentrated bitterness of supreme disgust, but with an air of the most genuine sincerity. "If you have patience to hear me run through the catalogue of names, with the real and the fictitious avocations of the individuals themselves, I will tell you something that cannot fail to strike you with amazement."

Christian leant over the table with a look of profoundest interest; and the German gentleman proceeded as follows:—

"In the first place, there is the fellow Wronki, who is in reality the Duke's butler: but he is dubbed a Count for the nonce and elevated to the dignity of Lord Steward. Then there is Gumbinnen, who when at home in Germany is the Duke's valet: but in England he is a Chevalier and Lord Chamberlain. Thirdly there is the half-starved scamp Raggidbak, the Duke's stable groom, but who is now called Groom of the Stole and dubbed a Baron. When he gets back to Germany he will have to shovel up the dung again. Then comes Himmelspinken—he is another groom, but here called a General and Master of the Horse. Master of the horse indeed! he has rubbed one down pretty often, I can tell you! Next comes Herr Humbogh—and a veritable humbug too, as you would call him in your language. Here he is figuring away as the Privy Seal,—whereas in Germany he is messenger at the Duke's gate. The fellow Kadger is in reality a footman, but now a Chevalier and Equerry. Frumpenhausen, rejoicing in the title of Count, and acting as Gold Stick, is a lacquey who attends on the Duke's carriage; and in that capacity carries the brass-headed cane which here is dignified as a gold stick. Ah! there is one more whom I had almost forgotten; and this is the man Farthenless, who must be very much astonished to find himself a Baron, but perhaps still more so at being Privy Purse, seeing that the ducal purse is not so capacious as to render a custodian necessary. But now—what do you think Farthenless is? A pawnbroker's man!"

Christian could not speak for astonishment.



[illegible] England [illegible] it is out of his [illegible] could not [illegible] at a hotel without his [illegible] but a com[illegible] it was agreed that the [illegible] should bring over the [illegible] and with [illegible] in the ducal retinue, and with [illegible] to keep a sharp eye upon the [illegible] Duke is quite as capable of lay[illegible] it on any of the starvelings that [illegible] I suppose it was deemed pru[illegible] Farthenless an official de[illegible] the dignity of Baron and the [illegible] Privy Purse,—both of which he will have to [illegible] the instant he gets back to Germany."

[illegible] was amazed almost to stupefaction by what he had heard; and the especial care which he had seen Baron Farthenless bestow upon the ducal plate was now fully accounted for. He remained a little longer in conversation with the intelligent German, and then took his departure from the tavern, more than half inclined to send in his resignation to his Royal Highness. But when he reflected that the term for which he was engaged would elapse in another fortnight, he considered that it would be as well to remain for so short a space: and to this decision he accordingly came. We need hardly inform the reader that the principal subject which continued to occupy his mind,—and to which all that related to the pauper Duke and his frowsy horde, was but of second-rate importance,—was the new and indeed brilliant position in which he found Isabella placed: nor less did he ponder with some degree of uneasiness on her companionship with that handsome and elegant-looking young man. Still Christian flattered himself that he was not altogether indifferent to the young lady; and he entertained so high an opinion of her, that he could not believe she would prove faithless to any such tender feeling entertained on his behalf—if it were really experienced. But on the other hand, a fear would steal into his mind that the influence of the new friends, or of the relatives—whichever they were—whom Isabella had found, might possibly lead her to yield to their views, and form some brilliant alliance which it was natural enough they should seek for her. Still, as we have said on former occasions, there was hope in the youth's heart; and in juxtaposition with his apprehensions, did imagination conjure up a proportionate amount of cheering dreams.

Thus the fortnight passed away,—during which Christian saw nothing more of the beautiful Isabella, and experienced no farther adventure in respect to the Germans at all deserving of notice. At the end of that period he received his dismissal, together with a certificate of good conduct from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe Stolburg-Quotha; and he was once more out of employment. Again he inserted an advertisement in the newspapers; and in the course of a few days he received a note from the Earl of Lascelles, desiring him to call at his mansion at Kensington.

[illegible] was a [illegible] in the month of March, and about the hour of noon, that Christian Ashton proceeded to Kensington; and was introduced into a large and handsomely furnished library, where he was desired to wait a few minutes and his lordship would be with him. Christian examined the book-shelves, and found that they were crowded with splendidly-bound volumes,—belonging, as a matter of course, to all classes of literature: but it occurred to him that very few appeared to have been at all used. Indeed, the impression produced upon his mind was that the library was what it too often is in the mansions of the great—intended more for show than for service. He wondered to himself what sort of a nobleman the Earl of Lascelles would prove to be; and in imagination he was depicting a tall, aristocratic-looking individual, when the door opened, and an old gentleman of sixty, of most ungainly figure—apparelled with a ludicrous admixture of *old beau* dandyism and of slovenliness—with large prominent features, the expression of which almost provoked an inclination to laughter—made his appearance. Christian was marvelling who this could be—whether the major-domo, the butler, the valet, or any other functionary of the nobleman's household—when the odd-looking individual, advancing straight up to him, said with a patronizing smile, "So you are the young gentleman who advertised for the post of private secretary? Well, upon my word, your appearance is prepossessing enough. You say your testimonials are good?—but I am terribly difficult to please, and I must examine you critically."

Christian had now no longer any doubt as to whose presence it was in which he stood: but he could not help thinking that his lordship was more fitted by nature to play the part of buffoon upon the stage, than to enact that of an hereditary legislator.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashton, and let us converse," resumed the Earl of Lascelles. "First of all, with regard to the testimonials?"

Christian produced them; and as the Earl took the papers, he said, "You see I can read perfectly well without spectacles; and yet now-a-days it seems to be the fashion for gentlemen to take to glasses at my age—which is five-and-forty."

Christian could scarcely help starting; for he would have wagered his existence that the Earl was sixty, if he was a single day.

"Ah, an excellent testimonial from the Duke of Marchmont! I know his Grace well. Between you and me," continued the Earl, "they say that his Grace and myself are the two stars of the House—in respect to personal appearance, I mean."

Again Christian felt astonished—as well indeed he might: for the Duke of Marchmont was a tall, well-made personage, and he had once been handsome enough until dissipation and evil passions had begun to mar his good looks: whereas the Earl of Lascelles had never the slightest pretensions to any such good looks at all, and was now a living counterfeit—an animate artificiality—a peripatetic cheat—a breathing lie—made up of padded garments, false hair and false teeth, and even a false complexion.

"Yes—we are called the stars of the House," continued his lordship, with an air of bland and condescending communicativeness, at the same time grinning like an antiquated goat: "but as for eloquence, I don't say I flatter myself—I only repeat what the public press says—when I add that his Grace cannot hold a candle to me. You shall come some evening to the House when I am going to make one of my grand displays of three or four hours. You will be astonished at the effect! Some of the noble Lords rush out from the House the moment I rise, and never come back till I have done: they can't stand the excitement of such thrilling oratory. Others will listen all the time with their eyes shut, so that they may concentrate their attention inwardly, and not lose a single word of what falls from my lips. I am not vain, Mr. Ashton—though vanity is, after all, the foible of young men like you and me: but I *may* say that those are the effects of a very peculiar power of oratory."

"Doubtless, my lord," answered Christian: and perhaps his response was susceptible of a double interpretation.

"Ah! this testimonial is from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. I knew his father well. I had a grand battle with him once——"

"In the war-time, my lord?" asked Christian, fancying that he ought to say something.

"No—at the dinner-table," responded the Earl. "The Duke prided himself upon being a very great eater, and was honoured accordingly in his own capital and by all the German Sovereigns. Well, during my travels, I arrived in the city of Quotha; and hearing of the Duke's fame, was determined to put it to the test. I must tell you that his Serene Highness——for the German Princes were only *Serene* in those days, and not *Royal*——His Serene Highness, as I was saying, was fond of challenges of that sort; and prided himself on having eaten three Englishmen into an apoplexy and four Scotchmen into an indigestion which turned to chronic dyspepsia; so that when I respectfully provoked him to a contest, he made sure of achieving an additional triumph. I laid his Serene Highness five thousand guineas against the Order of the Cormorant, instituted by his Serene Highness himself. Well, we sat down to table, surrounded by the whole Court. His Serene Highness led the way with a dish of sour krout: but I declared that I could not do things in such a peddling, trifling manner; and I requested to have a barrel brought in. You would scarcely believe it, Mr. Ashton—but I had got into the middle of the barrel before his Serene Highness had got half way through his dish. Then he took the roast meat and poultry, but there I beat him by half a fowl and a pigeon. He insisted upon tackling a dish of hard eggs, thinking that they would stick in my throat: and so they did too, with a vengeance!—but I nevertheless beat him by a yelk. He was ill for six weeks afterwards; and I was the hero of the entire Court during my residence there."

Christian Ashton could not help thinking that his lordship had become a hero on very singular terms; and the Earl proceeded to read the second certificate.

"Well, these are unexceptionable," he said, "and I think you will do."

Christian ventured to inquire what the nature of his duties would be; and the nobleman went on to explain them.

"The fact is, I have travelled a great deal—I have seen many strange things—I have been involved in some extraordinary adventures. I think of publishing my memoirs. I have already made many notes and memoranda; and there will be little trouble in arranging them properly. When I take a thing in hand, I am terribly energetic in carrying it out. My mind is bent upon this; and we shall work furiously. You must come and live in the neighbourhood, so that you may be always at hand when I want you: and as for salary, you may name your own terms."

Christian scarcely thought that the situation would suit him, inasmuch as he had already seen enough of his lordship to form the very meanest idea of his general character. But while he was reflecting—and the Earl was rattling away with some new anecdote, comprising a tissue of falsehoods—the youth, happening to glance from the window (the library being on the ground floor) perceived two ladies strolling with a gentleman in the grounds. He could not see their faces: but the figure of one of those ladies produced an immediate impression upon our young hero,—filling his heart with mingled hope, astonishment, and suspense. His countenance did not however betray any of these emotions; and the Earl, happening at the same time to glance through the window, exclaimed, "That lady on the right is the Countess of Lascelles. She is a wife every way worthy of such a husband—young and beautiful, elegant and accomplished. And that is my son, Lord Osmond. Ah! I see you start with surprise—and well you may. You naturally wonder that I can have a son of his age? But between you and me, I was wonderfully precocious, and was a father at seventeen. That other young lady is my niece, Miss Vincent."

The reader cannot be at a loss to conjecture why Christian had started. It was not because he was in the least astonished at the vain and frivolous Earl having a son of such an age, seeing that he had rightly guessed his lordship's own years to have reached sixty, so that he might very well have a son of twenty-three: but it was that at the moment the trio turned round at the end of the gravel walk—and Christian not only recognised in Lord Osmond the tall handsome young man through whom he had already experienced some little degree of mental trouble, but the sight of Isabella's lovely countenance had sent a thrill of joy through his heart. He now no longer hesitated to accept the proffered situation. He paused not to reflect whether he should be allowed to retain it when it came to be discovered that he was acquainted with Miss Vincent: the bare thought of obtaining a post which might bring him for hours together within the same walls which she evidently inhabited, was alone sufficient to make him hasten to conclude the bargain. The matter of salary was soon settled; and it was understood that he was to remove into the neighbourhood that very day, in order to be at hand to commence his duties on the ensuing one.

"I mean to treat you quite in a friendly and confidential manner," proceeded the Earl; "and therefore come with me and I will introduce you to the ladies and my son."

Thus speaking, the Earl opened a casement reaching down to the ground, and which therefore served the purpose of a glass door, affording egress upon the grounds. Christian followed with a heart palpitating violently. A thousand hopes and fears swept in a few moments through his mind: for he knew that now was the crisis to decide whether he should retain the post so eagerly sought, or whether the Earl should think fit to decline his services.

"My dear Ethel," exclaimed the old nobleman, hastening towards the Countess, "I am going to do what I have said! I shall write my memoirs—I have engaged a secretary—he is fully competent—we begin work to-morrow morning—and as he is a very genteel youth, I want to introduce him."

Lord Osmond fancied at the first glance which he threw upon Christian, that he had seen him somewhere before—but did not instantaneously recollect the how or the when. But Isabella's astonishment—and we may add her pleasure—were great indeed on perceiving Christian Ashton diffidently advancing behind her uncle, and on hearing the old nobleman proclaim that he had engaged him as a secretary.

"Why, cousin Bella!" said Lord Osmond, suddenly remembering where he had seen Christian, and now turning to Miss Vincent; "this is the very young gentleman who acted so nobly three or four weeks back at the review."

"Hey!—what?" cried the Earl in astonishment, but by no means in dissatisfaction: "Mr. Ashton the one who chastised that impertinent coxcomb? How was it you did not mention his name, Bella?"

"I did mention his name, uncle," answered Miss Vincent, with a modest blush: "I told you it was Mr. Ashton—with whom I happened to be acquainted——"

"Yes, I remember perfectly well," said the Countess of Lascelles, "that Isabella mentioned Mr. Ashton's name."

"Then I had forgotten it!" exclaimed the nobleman. "But it is no matter."

"I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Ashton," said Lord Osmond, frankly proffering his hand to our young hero.

Isabella also gave him her hand; and again did the modest blush appear upon her countenance. Lord Osmond observed that tremulous confusion on her part—but affected not to notice it. As for the Earl—*he* saw it not: for he had turned to his wife, and was launching forth into a description of the marvellous adventures he intended to give in his book, and of the tremendous sensation it was certain to excite when published. Christian now thought it becoming to make his bow and depart; and the Earl charged him to be punctual at the mansion at eleven o'clock on the following day. The youth was retiring through the grounds towards the entrance-gates, when he beheld that same individual (mentioned to him as Mr. Gibson) who had fetched away Miss Vincent from Mr. Chubb's residence. The recognition was instantaneously mutual; and the man with a sinister look started visibly on thus beholding our hero. He however said nothing; and Christian took his departure with feelings of mingled joy and wonderment. The source of his joy needs no description: but we must say a word or two in respect to the other feeling which inspired him. Was he to conclude that it was *not* on his account after all, that the beauteous Isabella had been removed from the parish-clerk's house? But if not so, then what became of Mrs. Chubb's tale relative to Mr. Gibson's annoyance at finding that he was lodging in the same house with Isabella? However, Christian had obtained the situation—the Earl had confirmed him in it after discovering that he was previously acquainted with Miss Vincent—and therefore though our hero wondered at some part of the whole proceeding, he had nothing to be troubled at: on the contrary, every reason to be rejoiced.

We have said that Lord Osmond noticed Isabella's tremulous confusion when she encountered Christian, but that he affected not to perceive it. This circumstance requires some little explanation. Lord Osmond, as the reader is aware, was profoundly enamoured of his mother-in-law, the beautiful Countess of Lascelles; and therefore he entertained not the slightest scintillation of jealousy in respect to his cousin Isabella and Christian Ashton. On the contrary,—when he thought he had discovered that these two were not indifferent to each other, he was rather glad of it; for it immediately struck him that if Isabella and Christian could be more or less thrown together, it would afford him (Lord Osmond) all the better opportunities of being alone with Ethel.

About an hour after Christian's departure, the Earl of Lascelles was seated in the library, arranging his memoranda in readiness for work on the following day,—when the confidential valet Makepeace entered the room on some pretence or another.

"Well, Makepeace," said the nobleman, looking up from his papers with a self-satisfied air, "I mean to astonish the whole world."

"The world, my lord," responded the sycophantic valet, "can be astonished at no achievement on your lordship's part."

"I think there is some truth in that," said the Earl, caressing his chin as he lounged back in the chair. "Nevertheless, my contemplated book will crown all my other triumphs; and I have engaged a secretary to assist in writing it."

"That young gentleman, my lord, whom I saw going out just now?" inquired Makepeace deferentially.

"The same," rejoined the Earl. "I am convinced he is a youth of great ability and lively intelligence, by the way, he listened to that anecdote of mine about my German feat. I don't think I ever told it you——"

For the first time in his life Makepeace did not wait to hear the anecdote: but interrupting his noble master, said significantly, "I presume your lordship cannot be aware that this is the very young gentleman——"

"Who lodged at the Rubb's or the Dubb's, or whatever their name is?" exclaimed the Earl. "In general I have an excellent memory for names: but I have lost sight of that one. Do you know, Makepeace, that when I was travelling in Russia, I fell in with a young Englishman, who had dislocated his jaw?"

"Indeed, my lord! Was it by a fall from his horse?"

"Oh, no!—merely by pronouncing the names of Russian noblemen, some of which would cover a sheet of paper to write them, and are all consonants. But *I* could pronounce them all with the greatest ease. Indeed, I was always a good hand at hard words. When I was seven years old I had all the classics at my fingers' ends; and made no difficulty of that name which was invented by Plautus—Thesaurochrysonichochrysides."

"I have often admired your lordship's extraordinary memory on such points," said Makepeace. "But about that young man——"

"Well, I know all about him," exclaimed the Earl: "he lodged at the parish-clerk's. But don't you see that things are greatly altered now; and even if there was ever any danger of my niece falling in love with the youth, there cannot be under existing circumstances. Besides, the landlady herself assured you that the young people scarcely ever saw each other; and now that I have purposely had Isabella brought home to the mansion that she may captivate my son's heart, she will of course jump at so splendid an alliance. Ah, it was an admirable stroke of policy on my part! But I think you will admit, Makepeace, that I am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man?"

"Your lordship is aware I have always expressed my astonishment that your lordship has not accepted the post of Prime Minister, which I am aware has been declined by your lordship on more occasions than one."

"Well, Makepeace, perhaps I had my reasons," said the Earl complacently. "But about the matter of which you were speaking. You see that when Lord Osmond threw himself at my feet a couple of months back, and implored my pardon for his previous misconduct in choosing to show his airs in respect to my second marriage, I could not very well help forgiving him. Besides, when I questioned her ladyship with regard to the motive of the visit he paid her at that time, she frankly informed me it was to convey through her the assurance of his contrition. What, then, was I to do? There was no alternative but to forgive Lord Osmond—and in forgiving him, to intimate that he might return and live at home. Then, don't you see, other reflections arose in my mind? Of course I am not jealous: I flatter myself that Lord Osmond, though younger than me, has not much the advantage in respect to good looks. In fact, between you and me, Makepeace, I don't think his hair curls so nicely, nor with such a natural effect, as this new peruke of mine. However, without being jealous, you know, it was only proper and becoming enough that I should give the Countess a female companion—you comprehend—not only for her own sake, and to prevent her from being thrown too much into the society of one whom I know that in her heart she does not like—but also to prevent the scandal-loving, tittle-tattling, gossiping part of the world from having any ground for impertinent or malicious observations. You understand, Makepeace—eh?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded the valet, with his wonted obsequious bow. "The policy was admirable, my lord—admirable."

"I was sure you would say so," continued the Earl. "Well, then, when you came and told me that, contrary to all previous understanding, there was a young gentleman lodging in the same house where Miss Vincent had been placed, it set me a thinking; and when I *do* think, Makepeace, it is no ordinary affair, I can tell you! In fact, I always reason with myself—there is nothing like it: I find it so much easier to convince myself than any one else. So, while I was thinking on this subject, I came to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Miss Vincent from a house where she might run the chance of falling in love with somebody who would not be rich enough to make her his wife. One thought leads to another, Makepeace; and so it struck me that I might just as well have the girl home at once;—for, after all, she had nothing to do with her deceased parents' offences against me. I reasoned that she would be an excellent companion for the Countess; and that if my son chose to fall in love with her, I really need not have any objection to their marriage. He will have plenty of money of his own; and after all, the sooner he does marry the better."

"To be sure, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"And since you told me that Isabella had grown up to be such a beautiful girl, I thought it highly probable that Lord Osmond *would* fall in love with her. You see, I am very shrewd, Makepeace—very shrewd indeed! Do you know that when I was quite a boy—it was one day at a race-course—I guessed under which thimble the little pea was——a thing that nobody was ever known to do before, or has ever done since. It was the very first time of guessing—and I won half-a-crown. I remember it perfectly well, because I played on and lost nine pounds afterwards—which was all I had about me."

"Your lordship was always noted for intelligence," observed the sycophantic valet.

"Well, you see my calculations are becoming correct. I watch Lord Osmond pretty narrowly; and always in my presence he shows the greatest attention towards Miss Vincent, and is exceedingly cool towards the Countess. Perhaps I should be offended at this conduct on his part towards her ladyship, were it not that lovers are always obliged to be cool to every lady except the object of their affection. Have not you noticed that my son *is* cool—almost pointedly so—in respect to her ladyship?"

"I have, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, as the reader has observed, invariably shaped his responses so as to suit the humour of his noble master.

"Well then, all things considered, Makepeace," continued the Earl, "there is no harm done in engaging this youth as my private secretary. You comprehend? Miss Vincent is sure to marry Lord Osmond; and there is not the slightest chance that she will bestow her affections on young Ashton. Besides, don't you see? the presence of this exceedingly good-looking youth in the house will put my son on his mettle, so to speak—and will make him ply his suit all the more arduously with Isabella. Ha! ha! Makepeace, another proof of shrewdness—eh? another admirable stroke of policy on my part?"

The valet of course assented, and here the discourse terminated,—the foolish old nobleman chuckling over the various combinations which he was thus bringing about, and flattering himself that there was not in all the world such a cunning dog as he was

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TWO ACCIDENTS.

BEFORE removing from Mrs. Chubb's to a new lodging at Kensington, Christian proceeded to pay two visits—one to his sister, and the other to Mr. Redcliffe. He communicated to Christina the intelligence that he had obtained a new situation; and the affectionate girl was delighted to find that her beloved brother so easily procured one employment after another. But on proceeding to Mrs. Macaulay's in Mortimer Street, Christian learnt that Mr. Redcliffe had been out of town for some days, and that it was altogether uncertain when he would come back. Christian therefore left a note for him,—making his kind friend acquainted with the change in his position, and expressing a hope to hear from him on his return to London. He then removed to Kensington, and entered upon the duties of his new situation.

Two or three weeks passed; and it was now the beginning of April. Three months had elapsed since Christina Ashton became the companion of Lady Octavian Meredith; and it becomes necessary for us to describe what had taken place during this interval. The reader will remember that Lord Octavian had persuaded Christina not to mention to Zoe the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, nor in any way to allude to the duel. It will likewise be borne in mind that it was with considerable reluctance the pure-minded Christina had assented to a course which she conceived to be fraught with a certain degree of duplicity towards her amiable friend and benefactress. Nevertheless, influenced by Lord Octavian's sophistical reasoning, the artless and inexperienced Christina was led to believe it was really for the sake of insuring Zoe's happiness, and to avoid giving a shock to her confidence in her husband, that the secret of the duel was to be so religiously kept.

For the first few weeks after our young heroine was installed in her new home, Lord Octavian's conduct was of such a character as to give her not the slightest uneasiness. He never sought to be alone with her: he never regarded her in a way that might lead her to suspect that he cherished a passion for her: his demeanour was precisely what it ought to be—that of a friendly but respectful courtesy. Nevertheless, the young nobleman continued to love Christina passionately, devotedly—we might almost say madly: but he endeavoured to exercise the strongest control over his feelings; and if he could not subdue them, he at least did not betray them. The reader has seen that there were many good qualities about Lord Octavian Meredith,—that he was naturally generous-hearted—and that though he did not love Zoe in the true meaning of the term, he nevertheless cherished a profound gratitude towards the wife who had brought him a fortune—and therefore experienced a full sense of his duty towards that wife. Besides, he perceived that she was devotedly attached to him; and it frequently made his heart cry out as it were in anguish to think that he could not adequately return the abounding fulness of the affection which she bestowed upon him. For all these reasons he made the mightiest efforts to stifle the feelings which he experienced towards Christina, and to force himself to remain in *deed* faithful to his wife, even if he could not be so in *thought*.

Thus, as we have said, several weeks passed away; and Christina had not the slightest reason to suspect that he cherished so profound a passion for her. It will be remembered that on the first day of her arrival he had rapturously taken her hand, and had regarded her with a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which had made her withdraw that hand somewhat abruptly, as the colour mounted to her cheeks and as her eyes were cast down: but she was led to reflect at the time that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. Therefore this particular incident which we have just brought back to the reader's recollection, and which occurred on the first day of her arrival, had not since dwelt sufficiently in her mind to amount to a suspicion as to the real state of Lord Octavian's feelings towards her. But, at the expiration of a few weeks, a little incident occurred which began to produce a change in Christina's mind and make her think tremblingly on several subjects.

It was one day—while her brother was still in the employment of the German prince—that Christina, while descending with some degree of rapidity from her own chamber to the drawing-room, trod upon one of the brass rods of the stair-carpet which had got loose; and as it rolled beneath her foot, she fell heavily backward. Her head came with such sudden concussion against the stairs that she was so stupified as to be unable to raise herself up. Some one was at the moment ascending the lower flight: it was Lord Octavian—and on perceiving what had happened, he sprang to our heroine's assistance. He raised her up in his arms,—exclaiming, "Good God, are you hurt? Oh, speak to me! for heaven's sake, speak to me! Sooner my own life, ten thousand times over, than your's!"

These words startled Christina into fullest vitality again. Blushing, and full of confusion, she extricated herself from Lord Octavian's arms:—bewildered by the effects of the blow and the impassioned ejaculations which had just burst from his lips, she could not murmur forth a single syllable of thanks for the succour he had rendered her: she staggered into the drawing-room, and sank upon a sofa with a returning sense of faintness. Octavian, who had now recovered his own self-possession, rang the bell violently, and ordered the maids to administer at once to Miss Ashton,—describing the accident that had occurred. He then, with considerate delicacy, left the apartment; and in a short time Christina was so far recovered, that she felt nothing beyond the pain arising from a severe contusion. We should observe that Lady Octavian Meredith was passing an hour with her father Mr. Armytage at the time that the accident occurred; and on her return, she was much distressed to hear of it.

But when Christina was alone, and enabled to deliberate without restraint upon the incident just described, what was the nature of her thoughts? Guileless and unsophisticated though she were, she could not possibly help feeling that there was in Octavian's ejaculations a certain enthusiasm and a wildness of fervour thoroughly disproportionate to the occurrence itself, and which therefore raised up a vague and indistinct suspicion in the young damsel's mind. And now too, as she pondered thereupon,—back to her memory came the incident which marked the first day of her arrival, and which we ere now recalled to the remembrance of the reader. She began to see, too, that there was something more than she had previously fancied in Octavian's conduct in calling on her, after the duel, under a feigned name—and also in so urgently beseeching her not to mention their previous acquaintance to Zoe. All these reflections naturally engendered new ideas and troubling suspicions in the mind of Christina. Still the purity of her nature made her endeavour to throw off the influence of these suspicions: but she could not. And furthermore, in strictly and carefully analysing her own feelings, the conviction gradually stole into her mind that it was more with surprise than displeasure—more with amazed confusion than with indignation or anger—that she had heard at the time those ejaculations sent forth from Octavian's lips. She shuddered with an unknown feeling. She felt as if she were doing something wrong: she thought that she should no longer remain beneath that roof—and indeed that she never ought to have tarried there at all when once she found that a secret subsisted between herself and Octavian and which was to be withheld from Zoe.

Yet what was she to do? To attach of her own accord importance to those ejaculations——no, certainly not! To leave the house precipitately, and without being able to assign any specific cause——equally impossible! She must remain therefore—at least for the present: there was no other step to be taken. The reader will not be surprised that Christina mentioned not the incident at the time to her brother: it would have been to shock the delicacy of her own soul—to be outraging her own feelings, were she to attach importance to Octavian's ejaculations, or to take it upon herself to give them a specific significancy.

Weeks again passed away—but not in the same manner as before. If ever Octavian and Christina found themselves alone together—which, as they dwelt beneath the same roof, necessarily occurred now and then—there was a mutual constraint: it was a feeling of uneasiness, an awkwardness and embarrassment, reciprocally visible. It appeared as if Octavian had something to say, but dared not give utterance to it; and as if Christina longed to dart from the room, but dared not take a step which would be so significant. Nor, when conversing in Zoe's presence, did the young nobleman and Christina look each other in the face with the same frankness as before. Octavian dared not trust his own regards—and Christina dared not meet them.

Thus painfully progressed matters after the little accident on the staircase. Nor again need the reader marvel if Christina made not a confidant of her brother: for if she analyzed her own feelings, she could not comprehend them—much less could she have explained them. It was with an effort that she now maintained a degree of cheerfulness: whatsoever gaiety she exhibited, was not natural as it was wont to be—but it was forced. At length another incident occurred which proved in its consequences more serious still.

It was the beginning of April: the genial breath of an early Spring was wooing the trees and the hedges to put forth their verdure, and the early flowers to show signs of returning animation. One day Zoe expressed a desire to take a drive into the country in a new phaeton which her husband had just purchased. It happened however that the domestic who attended the equipages, had that very morning received a slight injury from one of the horses, and was unable to do his usual duty. But Octavian—who now more than ever strove to maintain the kindest treatment towards his amiable and devoted wife—was determined that she should not be disappointed; and he suggested that as he himself would drive, they could easily dispense with the livery-servant. They accordingly set out in the new phaeton, drawn by a pair of handsome galloways, caparisoned in the most tasteful manner. Lord Octavian occupied the box: Lady Octavian and Christina were seated together. The drive took place through the northern suburbs of London, and into the country in the direction of Enfield. The horses were a new acquisition, as well as the vehicle itself: they proved to be spirited, and one of them gave some little indications of being vicious. Zoe questioned her husband upon the subject: but he assured her that there was no danger. The young lady was reassured; and the equipage rolled on to some considerable distance from London.

Presently, on the summit of a hill, the sudden opening of the gate of a stable-yard attached to an isolated dwelling, caused the vicious-disposed galloway to shy: whereupon Meredith, in a somewhat intemperate manner, bestowed three or four good stripes upon the animal. They both set off at full speed,—tearing down the hill as if they were mad—the phaeton flying along like a thing of no weight—or as if it were a feather borne on the wing of a hurricane.

"For heaven's sake, sit fast!" exclaimed Meredith, who was doing all he could to hold in the apparently frenzied animals.

Zoe and Christina exchanged affrighted glances,—each perceiving that the other was as pale as death. And no wonder!—for there seemed to be every prospect that the equipage would be dashed to pieces,—swerving as it did from one side of the road to the other—now with the wheels on one side half up a bank—then the next moment a similar process taking place with the wheels on the other side—and the steeds still continuing to tear on in utter defiance of Meredith's endeavour to hold them in. Long as it has taken us to describe all this, it was nevertheless the work of but a very few minutes; and as the equipage dashed precipitately down to the bottom of the steep hill, it was suddenly upset by the side of the road.

The very instant Meredith found the phaeton overturning, he sprang out with a marvellous agility; and though he fell—yet, as it was upon some grass, he escaped comparatively unhurt, and was immediately upon his feet. Christina and

Zoe were flung out violently; and they both lay senseless.

"My God, my God!" cried Octavian, in a voice of the wildest agony: "they are killed!"—and he bounded forward to raise *one* up in his arms—and that one was Christina: then from his lips came ejaculations similar to those which he had uttered on the previous occasion:—"Oh, speak to me! speak to me! for heaven's sake speak to me! Would that I had died instead of you!"

And Christina slowly opened her soft dark eyes; and Octavian, as frenzied now with joy as he was a moment before with terrible affliction, exclaimed, "Thank God, she lives! she lives!——O Christina!"

He was straining her in his arms, when she, awaking to full consciousness, extricated herself from his embrace with an abruptness that under any other circumstances would have been ungracious indeed—but which was now the result of the sudden conviction that swept in unto her soul that he was paying her an attention to which his own wife had the prior claim, though that wife was left neglected upon the ground! And there Zoe still lay, with her eyes closed—although at the first instant that Christina's glances were flung upon her, it struck her that those eyes were half open. The next instant however she supposed it to be mere fancy on her part.

Octavian raised Zoe in his arms: he inquired kindly enough if she were injured:—to do him justice too, he also appeared much distressed:—but there were none of those same wildly vehement and thrillingly impassioned ejaculations which had burst from his lips in respect to Christina. Zoe appeared to be entirely deprived of consciousness: she lay along, half supported in her husband's arms, her head resting upon his shoulder—and he continuing to inquire whether she were hurt?

"Oh, for assistance!" exclaimed Christina, wringing her hands in utter bewilderment: "what can I do? whither can I go? My benefactress! my friend!—Oh, dearest, dearest Zoe!"—and the young damsel, now throwing herself upon her knees, in a gush of uncontrollable emotion seized Lady Octavian's form from Meredith's arms, and locked it in her own fervid embrace.

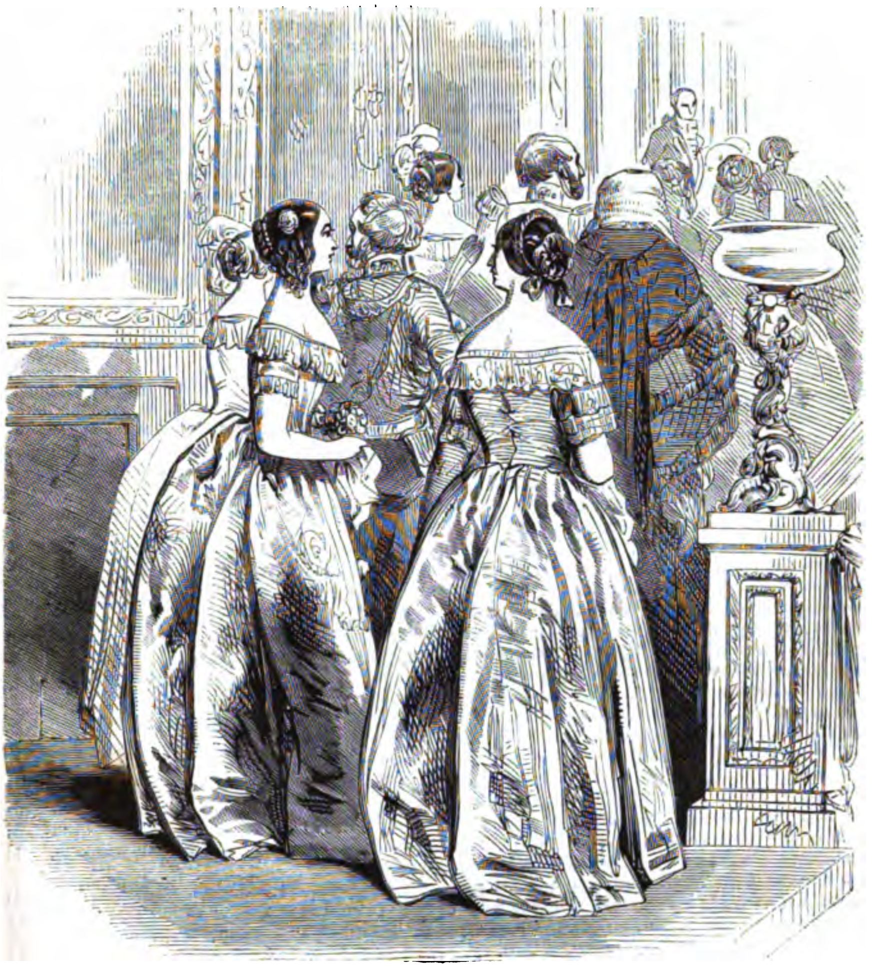
She felt Zoe's bosom heaving against her own, as if with the prolonged sigh of returning life: then suddenly the tears deluged forth from the lady's eyes—and flinging her arms round Christina's neck, she wept convulsively. Our young heroine breathed the most tender and soothing words in her ears,—again addressing her as a benefactress and a friend—beseeching her to compose herself, and give not way to this outburst, which she naturally supposed to be purely hysterical—the effects of the accident which had just occurred. But Zoe only appeared to cling all the more tenaciously to her affectionate friend's neck,—until seeming suddenly to recollect that her husband was present, she started to her feet and flung herself into his arms. She now grew composed; and Octavian, hastily inquiring of them both whether they felt much injured, was assured that beyond a few bruises neither of the ladies had received any physical hurt.

But now what was to be done? The horses, as if satisfied with upsetting the chaise, had stood still: but the vehicle was much injured; and moreover it was impossible to think of trusting their lives again to the vicious runaways. Fortunately at this moment a carriage drove up to the spot: it contained only a gentleman—and he at once proffered any assistance that he might be enabled to afford. A footman in attendance upon his carriage was accordingly commissioned to take charge of the phaeton, and drive it back to the Regent's Park; while Lord Octavian, Zoe, and Christina took their seats inside the carriage. During the drive to London, Christina manifested the tenderest solicitude towards Zoe, who continued deadly pale, and appeared to have received a more powerful shock than she chose to confess. Her voice was low and plaintive, but marked by an ineffable sweetness; and from time to time she hurriedly raised her kerchief to her face as if wiping away tears. Christina and Octavian were therefore confirmed in the opinion which they had both alike formed; namely, that Zoe had experienced hysterical results from the accident.

The gentleman to whom the carriage belonged, kindly took his companions to their residence in the Regent's Park, although his own destination was in the first instance quite at another point of the metropolis. When once more at home, Zoe sought her couch,—by the side of which Christina declared her intention to remain. Lady Octavian besought her to retire to her own room and rest herself likewise: but our young heroine, experiencing now only very partial effects from the accident, would not listen to the entreaty. Octavian sent for a physician, who prescribed what he thought requisite for Zoe; and agreeing with the others that she was somewhat hysterical, he ordered her to be kept extremely quiet. The medicament he administered doubtless contained some opiate: for shortly after it was taken, Zoe sank into a profound slumber—and Christina remained watching by her side.

And now we have some leisure to speak of Christina's thoughts. A portion of the ejaculations which burst from Octavian's lips, as he held her in his arms on the scene of the accident, had fallen upon her ears. Besides, had she not the fact present and patent to her knowledge, that Octavian had shown the *first* solicitude on her behalf, instead of flying to the succour of the one who had the prior claim? However uncertain she might before have been as to Lord Octavian's sentiments, she could doubt them no longer now. And, alas too! she could not conceal from herself that she on her own side felt not as her sense of duty told her that she ought to feel. On the contrary, there was for an instant a soft thrill of pleasure in her soul as she recalled to mind that ejaculation—"O Christina!" There was a world of avowal in that ejaculation: it was unmistakable—it was more than the eloquence of ten thousand tongues—it was the very heart itself laid bare!

Thus reflected Christina: but now her mind was made up how to act; and this resolve being taken, she felt more at ease. When it was announced to her that dinner was served up in the dining-room, she requested that a morsel of food might be brought to her in Lady Octavian's chamber, where she was resolved to remain. Zoe slept until the evening; and when she awoke and



found Christina still seated by her side, and saw by the tray which by accident was not as yet removed, that our heroine had dined there, she took her hand—drew her gently down towards her—and circling the young girl's neck with her arms, strained her to her bosom. She could not at first find words wherewith to express all her gratitude: but presently she burst into tears. These relieved her surcharged heart; and then she murmured forth in a broken voice her thanks for all Christina's kindness.

Lord Octavian now entered the room to make inquiries concerning his wife; and Zoe, smiling up at him with an amiable sweetness, assured him in a low plaintive voice that she should be better soon. He bent down to kiss her—and she embraced him fervently. Octavian spoke of having a nurse to sit up with her ladyship: but Christina at once said in a voice, the firmness of which showed that she would take no refusal, "That is my duty—and I intend to discharge it."

Zoe remonstrated with all that sweetness which was natural to her, and which now seemed more than ever amiable, invested as it was with the serene but plaintive melancholy that was upon her: but Christina was not to be dissuaded. Octavian withdrew; and our young heroine remained to keep the vigil by Zoe's bedside.

On the following day the physician discovered symptoms of fever on the part of his patient: they progressed rapidly—and in a few hours Zoe was seriously ill. During the night she became delirious, giving utterance to incoherent things, none of which however had any particular significancy. Christina remained in faithful attendance upon her,—never once closing her own eyes the entire night. For ten days did the dangerous period of Lady Octavian Meredith's illness last; and several times she appeared to be hovering upon the very verge of the grave. The physician, on the third evening, had insisted upon having a nurse: nevertheless Christina would not abandon her friend—but remained with her night and day,—recruiting however her own strength by lying down for a few hours in a bed which she caused to be prepared in the same room for the purpose. With her own hand she administered all Zoe's medicine—but usurping this duty with such sweetness of manner and with so much amiability that the old nurse, though belonging to a class amazingly jealous of their prerogatives, could not find it in her heart to be offended. Nor throughout all this time, did Christina once incur the chance of finding herself alone with Lord Octavian. Occasionally, when his visits were paid to his sick wife's chamber, the nurse was absent—Zoe was unconscious of what was passing around her—and thus it may be said that he and Christina were virtually alone. But then she would sit on the opposite side of the couch from that where he placed himself; and half concealed by the curtain, she would not once meet his gaze. When he spoke to her—which was in the same manner of friendly courtesy as was formally wont to mark his bearing—she on her side responded with equal courtesy, but gave no encouragement for a protracted conversation.

Thus did the time pass; and on the twelfth day after the accident, the physician pronounced Lady Octavian Meredith to be out of danger. She now became conscious of what was passing around; and from the lips of both the physician and the nurse, she learnt how Christina had affectionately and tenderly ministered unto her during her severe illness. Indeed the medical man, who was generous-hearted and conscientious, hesitated not to give Zoe the assurance that she owed her life to Miss Ashton,—observing that though the physician may prescribe, and though the pecuniary position of the patient may be such as to ensure every comfort, yet that there is something which surpasses all professional skill and which no wealth can purchase—namely, the unwearied and tender ministration of a devoted friend. In Christina had Zoe possessed such a friend; and as the sick lady wound her arms about our heroine's neck, she murmuringly said, "Christina—dearest Christina, you have been to me as a sister. Oh, you know not how I love you!"

Let us suppose another fortnight passed. It was now verging towards the end of April; and on a bright beautiful day, Zoe was reclining upon the sofa in the drawing-room, enveloped in a wrapper—still pale and feeble—but completely out of danger, and with every prospect, according to the physician's declaration, of a speedy convalescence. One of the casements was open; and the genial air, in which the freshness of Spring mingled with the warmth of approaching Summer, was wafted into the room. Christina sat near the invalid: her cheeks were also pale—for she had not once issued from the dwelling since the return after the accident. Octavian was out; and the two young ladies were alone together.

A newspaper lay upon the table; and during a pause in the conversation—for Zoe was prohibited from speaking too much—Christina took up the journal. It was more a mechanical action than a voluntary one—for her thoughts were preoccupied: and in that same listless, unintentional manner her eyes moved slowly over the columns of the front page. But all in a moment something appeared to rivet her gaze and concentrate her thoughts: for she gave a start like that of one who suddenly discovers an object which has been sought after. Then she appeared to be studying with profound attention the particular passage, paragraph, or whatever it might be, which had thus so abruptly claimed her interest. Zoe—who had her regards settled in plaintive and tender contemplation of Christina's beautiful countenance—noticed that start, and observed likewise the deep study which followed it. A minute or two elapsed in continued silence; and then Zoe said in a soft gentle voice, "What is it, dear Christina, that so interests you?"

Our heroine again started, as if aroused from a reverie; and she flung a half-timid, half-deprecating look upon Lady Octavian Meredith, as if she feared for a moment to give such explanation as the question required. But then suddenly recovering her self-possession, she answered with a sweetness singularly blended with firmness, "Here is an eastern lady of rank who is advertising for a companion, who must possess certain qualifications, all of which are minutely specified."

"And wherefore, my dear Christina," inquired Zoe, a strange expression for a moment flitting over her countenance,—"why does that advertisement interest you so much?"

"Because—because, my dear friend—my kind benefactress—my own sweet Zoe," was Christina's tremulously given response, "the advertisement appears to suit me."

Lady Octavian Meredith did not immediately make any answer: she however gazed earnestly upon Christina's countenance, as if seeking to read into the very depths of her soul: but the amiable lady's regards were notwithstanding fraught with an ineffable sweetness and a tenderness that was at the same time full of affection, surprise, and suspense.

"And you will leave me, Christina?" she at length said, but in a voice so low that it was only audible through its tremulous clearness.

"Yes, dearest Zoe," answered Christina, "I shall seek this situation:"—and then she averted her countenance to conceal the tears that were trickling down it.

She said not another word: she volunteered not another syllable of explanation. What more indeed could she say? To enter into particulars was impossible; and she would much rather lie under the imputation of deep ingratitude—painful though such an imputation were—than be guilty of the far blacker and perhaps more hidden ingratitude of remaining beneath that roof to stand in the way of Zoe's claims to all her husband's devoted love.

There was a long silence, during which Christina dared not turn her eyes again upon Lady Octavian Meredith: for she naturally feared that this silence on her friend's part denoted astonishment and displeasure. At length feeling her position was awkward in the extreme, she slowly and timidly reverted her eyes upon Zoe; and then to her mingled amazement and relief, she perceived that Lady Octavian, having just wiped the tears from her cheeks, was surveying her with an expression of tenderness ineffably sweet—indescribably angelic. Christina threw herself upon her friend's bosom: they embraced with true sisterly warmth: they mingled their tears together. For some minutes did they thus remain clasped in each other's arms; and not a syllable was spoken. Zoe was the first to break that silence at length; and then it was not to give utterance to a word of remonstrance against Christina's resolve—much less to breathe a syllable of reproach: it was merely to express the heartfelt prayer that her dear young friend would experience happiness wherever she might be.

Was it that Zoe penetrated Christina's motives, and that she esteemed them in the proper light,—appreciating them too with thankfulness? Such was the question which Christina naturally asked herself; and she knew not how to answer it. Very certain it was, however, that for the remainder of the time she stayed beneath that roof—which was now very short—she experienced nothing but the most sisterly kindness on the part of Zoe,—a kindness which she was never wearied of displaying, and which though mild, soft, and gentle, was all the more touching and profound. Our heroine applied to the Princess Indora—for she indeed was the Oriental lady advertising for a companion; and, furnished with a testimonial from Lady Octavian, she was readily accepted by the King of Inderabad's daughter.

It was on the third day after the scene above described between Christina and Zoe, that the former took her departure to remove to her new home. But since the accident she had not been once altogether alone with Lord Octavian; and inasmuch as when in his presence under any circumstances, her conversation was most guarded, she had not alluded in his hearing to this purposed removal. Whether Zoe had informed her husband or not, Christina was unaware. The young girl chose for her departure a moment when Lord Octavian was absent from the house; and on Zoe proffering the use of the carriage to take her to her destination, she declined it,—being determined that, unless from Zoe herself, the young nobleman should have no means of discovering whither she was gone. And something in her heart told her that Zoe had *not* spoken to her husband on the subject, and that she would *not* acquaint him with her new place of abode.

"Dearest Christina," said Lady Octavian, when the instant for parting arrived, "to you am I indebted for my life: my eternal gratitude and my heartfelt love are yours! Oh! believe me, dearest Christina, the feeling I cherish towards you, is—is——But I can say no more! God bless you, Christina! But we do not part for ever——No, no! I shall see you again, my sweetest, dearest friend: I shall visit you at the Princess's, if her Highness will permit it. Farewell, Christina—farewell!"

They embraced fervently: again and again did they embrace—the tears rained down their cheeks—one last kiss—one last farewell—and they separated!

CHAPTER XLIII.

INCIDENTS AT THE EARL OF LASCELLES' MANSION.

Now that the fine weather had set in, there was a particular room on the ground floor of the Earl of Lascelles' mansion, which the Countess Ethel seemed particularly to like. It was not large, but elegantly furnished; and, as her ladyship said, it had the finest piano of any apartment in the house. Adjoining this room was a bed-chamber, likewise so exquisitely appointed that it might serve as a lady's boudoir; and the windows of these apartments were on the side of the house, looking upon a grass plat dotted with parterres of flowers, and beyond which stretched a noble extent of garden.

For the last week or two the Countess of Lascelles had complained of indisposition,—representing that she was nervous, had sick head-aches, and was affected by the slightest noise. She had therefore begged the Earl to permit her to occupy these rooms for a brief space,—adding that she only thought thus of separating herself from him in order that she might recover her health all the more speedily; and as at the same time she made this request, she cajolingly desired him to send her the first proof-sheets of his memoirs to peruse—assuring him that she burned with impatience to become acquainted with a work that would astonish the world—the vain frivolous old man assented to the temporary separation of chambers.

Now it happened that one morning at about nine o'clock, the Earl made his way to the apartments which we have just been describing,—he having taken it into his head to relate to the Countess an adventure which he had never yet told her—and for the simple reason that he had only concocted it since six o'clock on that same morning, at which hour he had risen to prepare notes and memoranda to serve as a guide for his literary occupations by the time his secretary should arrive. Full of his newly concocted anecdote—to which he mentally added a few embellishing exaggerations as he threaded the passages towards the apartments above alluded to—the Earl reached the door; and without the ceremony of knocking, he walked in. Oh, incautious Ethel, to have left that door unlocked! It was a sad oversight: but if such oversights never took place, the chapters of romance would lose half their charm—actions for *crim. con.* much of their piquancy—and the public curiosity no mean portion of the food which occasionally gratifies it. The door was left unlocked, then; and as the Earl entered, he might have been knocked down with a straw—redoubtable, according to his own account, though he was—on beholding a female figure at the window half clasped in the arms of a young gentleman on the opposite side, and who seemed as if having just leapt out, he was taking a farewell kiss of the beauteous frail one.

That this latter was his wife and the other his son Lord Osmond, the Earl had not a doubt——though a sort of dimness immediately came over his vision. He stopped short—he tried to roar out something, but he could not: his powers of utterance seemed suffocated. All that he could do, was to raise his clenched fist, and shake it in speechless, impotent rage:—then in total bewilderment he turned from the room, not thinking of closing the door behind him, and scarcely knowing whether he was walking on his head or his feet.

At that same instant Lord Osmond was stricken with dismay on catching a glimpse of his father's form ere it disappeared by the doorway. The Countess beheld the change which suddenly came over the young nobleman's countenance, and the abruptness too with which he retreated from her arms. She also was seized with consternation; and a few hurried words on Osmond's part confirmed all her worst and wildest fears. Good heavens! what was to be done? This was the question they both with simultaneous rapidity put mentally, and which the next moment they orally asked each other. Ethel was sinking with affright: visions of fearful exposure, of infamy and disgrace, were sweeping like vultures through her brain,—when Osmond, suddenly smitten with an idea, showed by the quick brightening-up of his countenance that all was not quite lost.

"What is it—what is it that you think of?" demanded Ethel, with the feverish haste of suspense.

"My father will be straight off to Makepeace—and that fellow can alone save us. Fear not, dearest, dearest Ethel!"

The lady staggered half fainting away from the window, and sank upon an ottoman; while her paramour, darting from the casement in another direction, sped in quest of Makepeace. Fortunately he encountered the valet at an angle of the building; and laying his hand upon his shoulder, he said in a quick excited tone, "Five hundred guineas if you will serve me!"

Now, as Makepeace was just the man to sell his soul to Satan for about half the sum, he was by no means the one likely to refuse such an offer as that which Lord Osmond thus made him. He accordingly returned an affirmative answer with the most zealous readiness; and Lord Osmond at once gave him the requisite explanations, vowing however that he was merely jestingly whispering something in the ear of his youthful mother-in-law, and that thus though his lips might seem suspiciously near to her countenance, it was only in the playful mood he had described, and not for the purpose of either receiving or bestowing an illicit caress. This was of course said to save Ethel's character in the estimation of the valet,—though Osmond might have known that the attempted explanation was far too clumsy to impose upon so astute an individual as Makepeace. The most intelligent persons however often stultify themselves in such peculiar circumstances, and hug the belief that the most transparent gloss thrown over particular incidents, serves as a successfully enshrouding veil. So was it with Lord Osmond on this occasion; and Makepeace affected to receive the young nobleman's explanations as the legitimate and veritable one. He bade Osmond be of good cheer, and hastened off to throw himself purposely in the Earl's way.

He knew perfectly well that the old nobleman would on his own side at once seek an opportunity of unbosoming his wrongs to him (Makepeace); and therefore he hurried up into the Earl's dressing-chamber,—where indeed at that hour in the morning it was his duty to lock up in the drawers all the cosmetics and the artificialities which played so considerable a part in the nobleman's toilet. On entering the room, Makepeace found that the Earl was not as yet there: but he knew that he *would* come—consequently he did not go to search for him in any other part of the mansion, but began putting away the divers articles above referred to. In a few minutes the door opened; and the Earl entering, flung himself upon a chair with a countenance so truly comical in its misery that it was difficult for Makepeace to suppress a smile. But with the air of one who seemed to fancy that nothing unusual had taken place, the valet went on with his work; while the old Earl sat literally gasping in continued bewilderment, as if still quite at a loss to persuade himself that what he had seen had positively and actually taken place.

"Makepeace," at length he said, "I do verily believe that I am—a—a——"

"I know that your lordship is the most enlightened nobleman of the age," observed the valet, with an air of profound respect.

"Yes, yes, Makepeace—I am aware that the world does entertain such an opinion of me. But that does not prevent me, all the same, from being a—a——"

"The most modest and unassuming nobleman, my lord, that could possibly be," rejoined the valet.

"Well, yes—I think that in this respect," said the old Earl, "I possess the qualities of all great minds. But still some of the greatest men that ever lived have been what I fear I am now. I mean a—a——"

"A little too diffident in respect to your lordship's own powers," interjected Makepeace, still with an air of respectful gravity the most complete and the most imperturbable. "For instance, your lordship might have been Prime Minister if your lordship had thought fit to take advantage of the occasion when you made that wonderful speech——"

"Well, I think I was rather forbearing at the time," said the Earl: "but I did not like to be too hard upon the government, and oust them completely. But I feel very queer, Makepeace—very funny indeed. I could not have believed that such was the sensation when a man finds himself out to be a—a——"

"Popular author—as your lordship will assuredly become," said Makepeace. "It is already whispered abroad that your lordship has got a work in the press; and I know it is creating an immense sensation: for when I went to the circulating library yesterday to fetch your lordship Gulliver's and Baron Munchausen's Travels——"

"Yes, yes—I just wanted to look at the books you name, to see how the tremendous falsehoods those fellows have recorded, stand in sad contrast with the adventures, so startling though so truthful, which I am chronicling. But I never thought, Makepeace, that I should have to wind up my book by writing myself down—not an ass, Makepeace, as Dogberry did — but a — a——"

"Traveller of the most unimpeachable veracity," rejoined the valet: and now there was really something so exceedingly ludicrous in his master's countenance,—his sense of degradation struggling with his pride—the conviction of a sustained, wrong yearning to proclaim itself, but held back by the shame of declaring what he felt himself to be,—all these feelings finding such comical expression in features whose aspect was at the best of times most ludicrous, that the valet never experienced such difficulty in keeping his countenance.

"It's all very well that I am everything you say," continued the Earl, with unusual pettishness—for never was his idea of his own greatness so cruelly shocked, or brought down to a level so closely bordering on a sense of abject littleness: "but it does not prevent me from being, Makepeace — eh, Makepeace? — you know what I mean——a—a——" and then with a desperate effort, and before the valet could interject another complimentary phrase, the Earl blurted forth—"a cuckold!"

Makepeace started with an astonishment so admirably feigned that his master believed it to be perfectly genuine; and for nearly a minute they gazed upon each other,—the valet as if in speechless amazement, the Earl with a grin that was most ludicrously doleful.

"My lord," at length said the valet, "there must be some terrible mistake in all this. What! the Countess forget her duty to her husband!—and such a husband!—a husband who is in all respects one in ten thousand! Surely your lordship is labouring under a delusion?"

"Well, I don't know, Makepeace. It's true I've seen strange things in my time. There was the spectre of the Hartz mountain—I nodded familiarly to him: but he took his hat right off to me."

"A homage to your lordship's rare qualities," said the valet.

"Well—and then there was the mirage, too," continued the nobleman. "I was once riding on an elephant in Africa; and in the horizon which bounded the desert, I beheld the reflection—but with this simple difference, that the elephant was riding on me."

"Emblematical of your lordship's great bodily strength," interjected Makepeace.

"Well, they were optical delusions, after all," said the Earl: "but really, when one sees a young gentleman kissing a young lady, it is difficult—eh, Makepeace?—to persuade oneself that *that* is an optical delusion."

"And yet, my lord—with due deference to your superior understanding," replied the valet, "there might be an optical delusion on such a point as even this. Indeed, when I bethink me, I just now saw something that might serve as an illustration—if I dare introduce such names in connexion with such a matter——"

"Speak out, Makepeace," said the Earl, fidgetting about on his seat: "though I tell you it will be no easy thing to persuade me that I am not—you know what I mean. But about this illustration of yours?"

"It is simply this, my lord," resumed the valet. "Just now, when your lordship descended from the dressing-room, I went into the garden to pick a flower or two for my own chamber——I am very fond of flowers, my lord——when I beheld Lord Osmond——"

"Ah, Lord Osmond!" muttered the Earl, grinding his false teeth and clenching his fist. "My own son—the villain!"

But Makepeace, as if not noticing the interruption, went on to say, "I beheld Lord Osmond laughing gaily with Miss Vincent; and she too was laughing heartily—evidently at something which he had just been saying to her. Well, my lord, just at that moment the Countess appeared at the window of her own room; and her ladyship gaily exclaimed, 'What lovers' secret is this passing between you?'"

"She said that—did she?" cried the old nobleman eagerly, and quivering with suspense.

"Yes, my lord—that is what the Countess said; and she appeared to enjoy amazingly the confusion into which her sudden appearance at the casement had thrown Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent. Then Miss Vincent, with many blushes, said to Lord Osmond, 'Do pray, my dear Adolphus, tell the Countess what it is we were saying.' You will pardon me, my lord, for being so explicit——"

"Yes, yes—go on, go on!" said the Earl, catching eagerly at the hope of finding himself no cuckold after all.

"Well, my lord, the rest is soon told," continued Makepeace. "Lord Osmond rushed up to the window, while Miss Vincent stood blushingly aside; and he forthwith whispered the secret in the ears of the Countess. Now, my lord, what I mean to infer from all this is, that suppose any one had been near enough at the time to see merely Lord Osmond and her ladyship under those circumstances, and yet too remote to have overheard what previously took place—the impression might have been very detrimental indeed——"

"By heaven!" shouted the old Earl, "I am no cuckold after all!"—and springing up from his chair, he began dancing and capering about the room, performing the most extraordinary antics and throwing his body into the most grotesque contortions. "Why, do you know, Makepeace," he ejaculated, when it at length pleased him to desist from those demonstrations which however interesting as an expression of feeling, were certainly somewhat uncouth if regarded in the light of attempts to exhibit the twistings and twirlings which the human limbs can achieve, and to display how the human frame can become as circumvolved as a corkscrew,—"do you know, Makepeace, that it is the very incident you have been so innocently describing, which put such a dreadful idea into my head? And yet I now see it all! It was an optical delusion——yes, and an auricular delusion also: for would you believe it, Makepeace, that I could have not only sworn I saw the kisses but likewise heard them?"

"It shows, my lord, how even the most intelligent can deceive themselves," said the valet gravely.

"It does indeed! But what a fortunate thing I did not give way to my rage! I would not for the world have exposed myself so foolishly."

"It would indeed, my lord, have been a very sad business," rejoined Makepeace.

"Yes—and what would the Countess have thought of me?" exclaimed the old nobleman. "You see, Makepeace, what extraordinary command I have over my temper. There is not another man in England that could have so restrained himself. But I am exceedingly cool and collected in emergencies. I remember once when I was first in the commission of the peace——it was down in the country that the thing happened——I was called upon to stop a prize-fight that was taking place. I proceeded to the spot, and saw two great hulking fellows—each at least six feet high, and with fists that could fell an ox—fighting in the midst of a ring. Well, Makepeace, I did not rush in to part them—I let them go on fighting——"

"Which proves, my lord," responded the valet, "that your lordship does indeed possess an extraordinary degree of coolness."

"And never did I display it more completely than just now. Of course, Makepeace, you will not mention to a soul that such a thing ever entered into my head? Ah! and Adolphus and Isabella have got on so well together that they are regular lovers—eh? Capital! capital!"—and the old Earl, chuckling at the idea, rubbed his hands gleefully: for though his suspicion was fully removed, yet some how or another he was very anxious that Lord Osmond should wed with all possible despatch and bear his bride away to another home. "I tell you what, Makepeace—it is quite evident that my son and niece are immensely attached to each other; so we must marry them off as soon as possible. But young people are so diffident—they take months and months before they dare speak of settling the wedding-day. I know it was the case with me when I fell in love with my present Countess. I was exceedingly diffident——and then too, you know, I had that long attack of the gout which chained me to my room for three months. But about this young couple——I will do something to make Adolphus hurry matters on apace. Ah! the idea strikes me—and you will confess, Makepeace, when you hear it, that it is an admirable stroke of policy."

"I have no doubt of it, my lord," said the valet: "everything your lordship does, is impressed with a high intelligence."

"Well, I think that you are about right there, Makepeace," said the old Earl, complacently. "And now I will tell you what I propose to do. That Christian Ashton is a very nice lad—and so genteel too in his manners—indeed quite the gentleman——"

"He could scarcely be otherwise," observed Makepeace, "after being a month in your lordship's employment."

"Yes—gentility reflects itself. But about my plan—I propose to throw him in Isabella's way: I will invite him to dinner—I will leave Adolphus to hand down the Countess from the drawing-room, so that young Ashton must give his arm to Miss Vincent—and then he will sit next to her at table. Perhaps I will drop him a hint that he is to pay her attention——he is so docile and obliging, he does everything I tell him. For instance yesterday he wanted to spell *shrubbery* with two b's: but I bade him put only one, and he obeyed me immediately—with such a pleasant smile too!—so that I am sure he will do what I tell him in the present case. His attentions will be flattering to Isabella; for all young girls are coquettishly inclined—just as young men like me are apt to be rakish. However, as I was saying, Isabella will be pleased—Adolphus will be jealous—and he will be urged on to ask his cousin to name the day. Now, what do you think of my scheme, Makepeace?"

"I think your lordship possesses the wisdom of Solomon," answered the valet.

"Well, I believe that you do not exactly stand alone in that opinion. But now I will just run and ask the Countess how she is to-day: for I am prouder and fonder of her than ever, after having so shamefully suspected her."

Away sped the old Earl to Ethel's apartments; and the moment he made his appearance, she saw that Lord Osmond's device, practised through the medium of Makepeace, had completely succeeded; and she was infinitely relieved by a result which she had scarcely dared hope would have been attained. Alas, we are bound to declare that Ethel was guilty! Those fine resolves which some months back she had adopted—and at first too with a prospect of really having strength of mind sufficient to carry them out—had gradually melted away beneath the influence of Lord Osmond's tender looks, of his impassioned language, and of his great personal beauty, since the young nobleman had contrived to obtain admission once more into the paternal mansion. Yes—Ethel had fallen: but we choose not to dwell at unnecessary length upon guilt which under all circumstances was so deep—so deadly!

The silly old Earl lost no time in putting his precious scheme into execution. Christian came at the usual time that day; and having written to his noble employer's dictation for three or four hours—and an astounding admixture of mendacity, self-conceit, and nonsense it was that he had thus to write—he was about to depart, when the Earl caught him by the arm, and addressed him as follows:—

"You are a very good youth—and I am very much attached to you: but you must not put two b's in *shrubbery* for the future. You are to dine with me to-day. Make yourself look as spruce as possible—and come at six o'clock. There will only be ourselves, the Countess, Lord Osmond, and my niece: make yourself quite at home, and don't hesitate to pay such little attentions to Miss Vincent as a young gentleman is bound to show towards a young lady. Why, God bless me, how crimson you turn!—you blush just like a woman! Pooh! no diffidence! Mind you hand Isabella down to dinner—sit next to her—and talk without restraint. And now go; for I mean to sit down for an hour or two and invent——I mean make notes of some more adventures for our occupation to-morrow."

Christian went away astounded—as well indeed he might be. What could it possibly all mean? Had the old lord suspected his passion for the beautiful Isabella? did he suspect likewise that his niece had not regarded the youth with indifference?—did he purpose to favour their loves? or was he adopting some means to inflict a crushing punishment, and overwhelm our presumptuous hero with the most humiliating exposure? But no: Christian could not fancy that this latter conjecture was the solution of the mystery. He had seen quite enough of the Earl's character to be aware that he was incapable of any proceeding that had aught grand or striking in it: and moreover, that if he meditated mischief, he was unable to conceal the pettiness of his mind beneath an air of frank cordiality and kindness.

"However," thought Christian to himself, "no matter what his lordship's motives are, let me think only of the joy afforded by this prospect of passing hours in the society of Isabella!"

We must observe that Christian had no longer the slightest jealousy in respect to Lord Osmond. He had often noticed the young nobleman, the Countess, and Isabella walking together in the grounds; and had invariably seen that while Osmond and Ethel kept together, Isabella would either linger behind, or else walk by the side of the Countess and not by that of her cousin Adolphus. Thus, although Christian felt tolerably well certain that Lord Osmond was not thinking of paying his addresses to Isabella,—yet on the other hand his naturally pure mind suspected not for an instant the criminal intimacy which subsisted between that young nobleman and his beauteous mother-in-law. We may here observe too that Isabella—even more femininely chaste-souled than one of the opposite sex could possibly be—was equally far from imagining that an unholy passion subsisted on the part of her uncle's wife and son.

Two or three weeks more passed away; and during this interval Christian frequently dined at the Earl's table. Lord Osmond and the Countess were perfectly well aware of the motive for which he was thus brought into their society, and treated as an equal in the little family circle: for Makepeace, whom the five hundred guineas had bought entirely over to Lord Osmond's interest, had failed not to inform the young nobleman of his father's delectable scheme. Isabella imagined that her uncle was merely displaying these civilities towards Christian in consequence of a disinterested esteem for the youth's merits: while Christian himself continued as much in the dark as ever in respect to the whole proceeding on the part of his noble employer.

CHAPTER XLIV.

YOUTHFUL LOVE.

It was a serene but profound happiness which the youthful lovers now enjoyed—for lovers they assuredly were, although as yet no syllable from our young hero's lip had revealed the affection which he experienced. But the eyes speak a language more eloquent than that of the tongue; and the sympathies of two hearts, pouring forth in reciprocal transfusion—gentle and unseen—make mutual revelations which are not to be mistaken. When hand touches hand and the pulses of the two beat quicker—when the gaze of the lover settles in respectful tenderness and bashful admiration upon the countenance of the adored one, as if his eyes would penetrate through the mirror of her own orbs, deep down into her heart's tabernacle and feast their looks upon the hived sweetness of her own pure love—and when her eyes, modestly sinking beneath that gaze, veil themselves with the richly fringed lids,—then is love's tale told on the one hand and understood on the other,—reciprocated too as well as understood, though not a syllable from the lips may pass between the enamoured pair. Thus was it with Christian Ashton and Isabella Vincent.

In the presence of the Earl, Lord Osmond and the Countess were exceedingly upon their guard; and as the young nobleman had every reason to be rejoiced that Christian was now so much brought within the sphere of the family circle, he had not the slightest notion of interfering in respect to the loves of the youth and Isabella. For that such an affection subsisted between them, was visible enough to any eyes save those of the foolish old Earl. Christian joined them in their rambles in the garden; and as he walked with Isabella, it necessarily threw the Countess and Adolphus together without the risk of exciting any suspicion on the part of the younger pair as to the illicit intimacy existing between them. Thus was it that both Lord Osmond and the Countess had every reason to be pleased that Christian was so much at the house; and for the same motive the young nobleman did not choose to pay any marked attention to Isabella, even though by so doing he might the more effectually have lulled the Earl into complete security in respect to the Countess.

One day Miss Vincent was to be presented at Court at one of the Royal drawing-rooms. The Countess of Lascelles, as a peeress, was to introduce the young lady: but when the appointed day came, she was really indisposed and unable to leave the house. Isabella's naturally retiring disposition would have shrunk from this ceremony which to her had the aspect of an unpleasant ordeal: but it was a whim of her uncle's, and therefore must be gratified. He was resolved that the presentation should take place: and therefore as the Countess could not assist in it, the Earl speedily enlisted the services of two titled ladies of his acquaintance. The fact is, the old nobleman was getting wearied of his son's delay—as he thought it—in openly proposing for Isabella's hand; and therefore he was resolved to accomplish another of his fine strokes of policy. He fancied that if Isabella were seen apparelled with all the elegance, taste, and richness which were inseparable from Court costume, her appearance would be so ravishing that Adolphus could not possibly for another moment resist beseeching her to name the nuptial day.

And truly beautiful indeed was Isabella Vincent on this occasion. Her glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, was decorated with a single white camelia—a fitting emblem of her own immaculate purity. The dress that she wore—combining the necessary attributes above specified—set off her tall, slender, sylphide shape to the utmost advantage: while the fear that she might not acquit herself properly, heightened the colour upon her cheeks, which made her seem the fairest image of modest loveliness that ever mortal eye rested upon. And to Court Isabella went: but while proceeding thither in the carriage with her lady-chaperons—while ascending the staircase at the palace, in the midst of a throng of all that was highest in rank, most brilliant in beauty, and most eminent in respect to State dignitaries—while passing through the splendid saloons—while kneeling to kiss the hand of Royalty—and while returning again to the mansion at Kensington,—there was *one* image which was never absent from the charming maiden's mind——and this was the image of Christian Ashton.

The Earl of Lascelles was again completely out in his reckoning. Lord Osmond was too deeply enamoured of the Countess to be affected with the charms of any other being in feminine shape, no matter how transcendingly lovely were the aspect which this being wore. But how was it with Christian Ashton? He beheld Isabella pass out of the carriage when going, and alight from it on her return; and never in his eyes had she appeared so fascinating—so sweetly beautiful—so matchlessly charming. He knew that she loved him: but yet he felt that to complete his happiness, he must obtain the avowal from her lips. At once did he take the resolve to seise the first opportunity to confess his passion and elicit a reciprocal tale from her. But the next moment a feeling of sadness came over him:—how dared he aspire to the hand of an Earl's niece? and how could he ever hope to be in a position to make her his wife? This very circumstance of her presentation at Court was a source of pleasure and pain to our young hero,—of pleasure inasmuch as it enabled him to behold Isabella apparelled in a way to set off her loveliness to its utmost advantage—and of pain because it forced upon him the conviction that situated as he was, it seemed presumptuous to a degree, if not absolutely hopeless, for him to aspire to the hand of one who belonged to the circle of Aristocracy and was enabled to enter within that of Royalty.

And this strain of thought led him on to reflect for the hundredth—perhaps the thousandth time, on those mysterious circumstances which had recently enveloped Isabella as with a veil of mystery. From being ignored by her relatives, she was suddenly transferred into their very midst: from occupying a humble lodging in the house of coarse vulgar people, she was all in a moment removed to a palatial mansion. What could be the signification of all this?—wherefore had Makepeace assumed the name of Gibson when calling at the Chubbs' to liquidate the stipend for Isabella's board? Christian was bewildered: he knew not what to conjecture—what to surmise. When walking with Isabella in the grounds, and when having the opportunity of private conversation, he had not ventured to touch upon those subjects: nor had she of her own accord ever in the slightest way alluded to them.

But from the contemplation of these mysteries, Christian's mind reverted to that of Isabella's loveliness, the amiability of her disposition, and the elegant sweetness of her manners. Despondency on account of the difference of their social positions, was again succeeded by hope: and again too did the determination settle in his mind that he would seek an opportunity to avow his love and to elicit a reciprocal confession from her own lips.

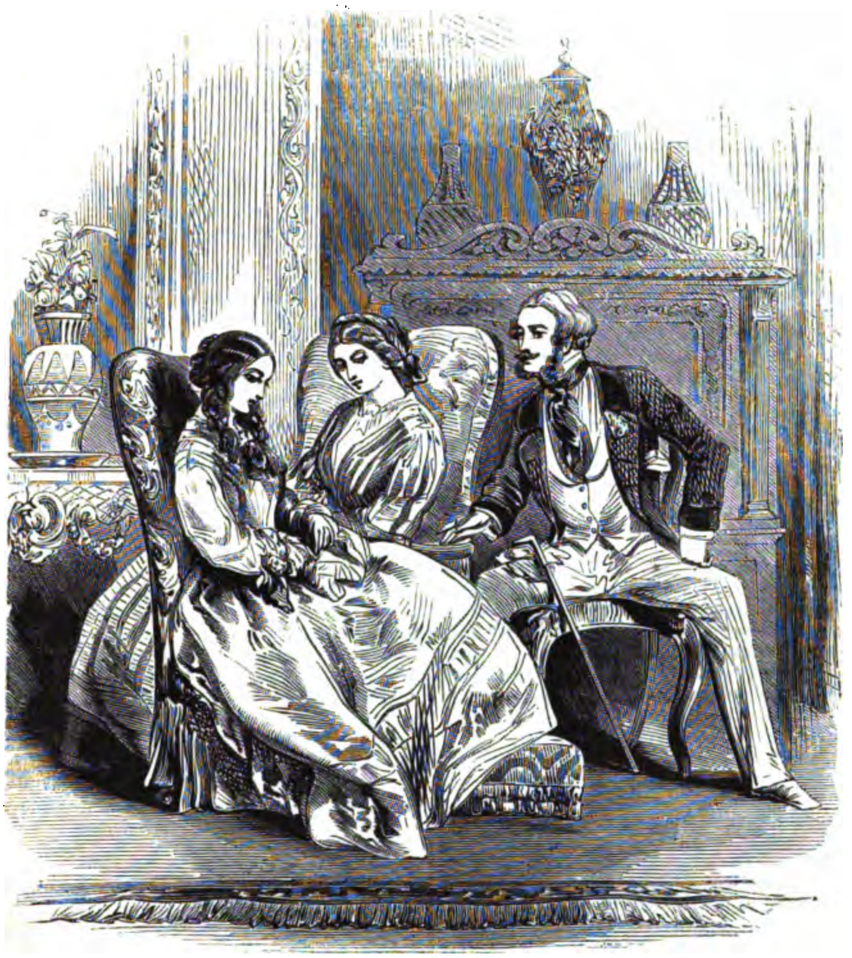
That opportunity presented itself in the evening after Isabella's return from Court. Christian was invited to dinner at the Earl's mansion; and after the dessert, Lord Osmond proposed a stroll in the garden. The Earl refused to be of the party: for he was inwardly chuckling at the idea that his last grand stroke of policy was producing its effect, and that Isabella's appearance of that day was now certain to elicit something decisive from his son's lips towards her:—hence his refusal to join the party; for he concluded that Adolphus would take care to stray apart with Isabella, while Christian kept the Countess company. So the Earl sat over his wine,—partly chuckling at what he fancied was going on—and partly sketching forth in his imagination some astounding adventure for the literary lucubrations of the morrow.

Little did he suspect that while Lord Osmond and the Countess were seated together with hands fondly clasped, in an arbour situated in the most secluded part of the grounds, Christian and Isabella were walking in a shady avenue quite on the other side of the enclosure. And Christian told the tale which he had resolved to tell—and obtained the avowal which he had hoped to elicit. The hearts of that young pair were confessed the one to the other: and both were happy. Would the reader have us enter into the minutest details, and chronicle every word that passed between them?—would he have us extend our narrative into the fullest particulars descriptive of this love scene? And yet we might do so: for though the tale of love is the oldest known to human beings, and commenced in Paradise itself before the Fall,—yet is it ever new, and therefore ever interesting. The forms of speech which convey it, may be infinitely varied—yet are the end and purpose ever the same; and countless though the world's languages be—different too in the richness or the poverty of idioms, figures, and phrases,—yet have they each and all a sufficiency—aye, even a copiousness of words wherewith to form that tale.

But it is *not* our purpose to record the conversation which then took place between Christian and Isabella. Suffice it to say that after hesitating, and trembling, and falling into confusion,—the youth, in the very midst of his bewilderment, at length found himself breathing the avowal which he had so much longed to make; and in Isabella's blushing cheeks and downcast looks, he read the response long ere it was softly murmured from her lips. Then they were happy both—Oh, so happy!—joy beating in their hearts, and their hands thrilling to each other's touch. The maiden spoke but little—the youth not much more—when once the reciprocal avowals were made; and the little that they did say, was connected only with their love: they spoke not of the future—they thought not of how the hope which was in their hearts was ever to be realised: it was sufficient for them that they loved each other, and that for the present they were together!

It was not until the following day that Christian ventured to speak to Isabella relative to those mysteries which had surrounded her at the time of their first acquaintance at the parish clerk's house: and now it was that our young hero received the following narrative from Miss Vincent's lips:—

"My mother, Lady Isabella, was the sister of the Earl of Lascelles, and many years younger than himself. Were she alive now, she would be scarcely forty. She was young therefore when she first learnt to love my father, Mr. Vincent, who was only a poor lieutenant in the army. But though poor in respect to the world's goods, he was rich in every intellectual accomplishment and generous quality of the heart. Lady Isabella, who



had long been an orphan, did not reside with her brother the Earl—but with a maiden aunt in the country. This aunt was proud, harsh, and severe; and the moment she perceived that a feeling of affection was springing up between her niece and Lieutenant Vincent, she unceremoniously and rudely forbade the latter her house. At the same time she wrote to the Earl of Lascelles, who was in London,—informing him that his sister had fallen in love with a penniless officer, and that he had better come and fetch her away at once. The Earl did so; and when he had his sister with him in the metropolis, he insisted that she should receive the addresses of a particular friend of his own—a nobleman of rank and wealth, but who was old enough to be Lady Isabella's father. Vainly did my poor mother beseech that her brother would not sacrifice her so cruelly: he was inexorable—and perhaps you have already seen enough of my uncle, to be aware that whatever idea, whim, or caprice he takes into his head, *must* be gratified. Perhaps he thought that he was only doing a brother's duty towards a young orphan sister: perhaps his motives were good, since his aim was to secure for her a prosperous position. At all events, as I have said, he remained deaf to her entreaties; and matters progressed so far that the day was fixed for her elderly suitor to conduct her to the altar. At that crisis Mr. Vincent arrived in London on a temporary leave of absence from his regiment in the provincial town: he and Lady Isabella met—and they resolved to part no more. She fled with him to the dwelling of a female relation of his own; and so soon as circumstances would permit, their hands were united. Alas, my poor mother!—she found herself discarded by all her relations—even by her own brother: but she had a consolation in my father's devoted love."

Here Isabella paused for a few minutes, during which she wiped away the tears which the recital of her parent's history drew from her eyes: and Christian, taking her hand, pressed it tenderly.

"I do not remember my father," continued the young maiden, in a soft plaintive voice: "he died when I was only three years old. You may easily suppose that the widow of a lieutenant in the army did not find herself very happily placed in a pecuniary sense. It was for my sake—for the sake of her orphan child—that she wrote imploring letters to her aunt and her brother, beseeching their forgiveness and their succour. I regret to say that so far as forgiveness was concerned, their hearts were closed against her: but her brother the Earl consented to make her an allowance of three hundred pounds a-year. This was at least some consolation to my poor mother: for she knew that her child whom she loved so tenderly, would be beyond the reach of want, and that she would likewise be enabled to give me a good education. It was in Lincolnshire that my father died; and it was there that my mother continued to dwell. I was educated, until the age of fourteen, under her immediate supervision: she would not send me to a boarding-school—she could not consent to separate even for a single day from the only joy of her heart! It was when I had obtained that age of fourteen, that this fond and affectionate parent of mine was seized with an illness which speedily threatened to prove fatal. Ah, Christian!" continued Isabella, in a voice so low and tremulous that it was scarcely audible; "never, never can I forget the scene at my mother's death-bed! It often steals upon me during the day—and comes back to me in dreams by night: methinks that I feel the last fond pressure of her arms now around my neck—the last kisses she imprinted upon my cheeks—and the tears too which bathed these cheeks of mine! Then it was that she told me her own past history; and amidst convulsing sobs informed me that I should be left in the world dependent upon an uncle whom I had never seen. But I must observe that when her indisposition had first threatened grave consequences, she had written to the Earl of Lascelles, imploring him to send her the assurance that her daughter—so soon to become an orphan—would not be neglected. The Earl wrote back to say he would look after my welfare; and thus my poor mother's death-bed was not one of unmitigated affliction: she had still the hope that her brother's promise would be fulfilled on behalf of myself. And while breathing this hope, and invoking heaven's choicest blessings upon my head, that dear mother of mine surrendered up her spirit into the hands of the Eternal!"

Here Isabella again paused; and Christian gently said, "Do not continue your narrative now: it afflicts you too much."

"Yes—I will complete it, Christian," she answered: "for it is a tale which must be some day told to your ears. You may well conceive that the task is a painful one; but being entered upon, it is better to achieve it than to be compelled to renew it at a future period."

Christian recognised the truth of the sweet maiden's remarks; and she continued in the following manner:—

"I wrote to my uncle the Earl of Lascelles, to inform him of my poor mother's death: he remitted me money, and bade me, when the funeral was over, come up to London, where he had secured me a home beneath the roof of a highly respectable family, whom he named. Conceive my distress when I thus learnt that I was an object of no sympathy with my titled relative—but merely a being for whom he felt himself bound to make an eleemosynary provision so that I should not starve! Instead of hastening in person to bestow a paternal protection on the poor orphan of so tender an age, he bade me journey up to London by myself: I was not even to find a home beneath his own roof—but was to be consigned to the care of strangers. Ah! Christian! my first experience of the world was thus sad enough."

"Do not weep, sweetest Isabella!" whispered our young hero, as he now pressed her hand to his lips. "Fortune's aspect has changed towards you—and you are differently situated now."

Isabella threw upon her lover a look of bashful tenderness; and she continued her narrative.

"I arrived in London—and proceeded at once to the house of the Rev. Mr. Hickman—by whom, as well as by the ladies of his family, I was kindly received. Mrs. Hickman took an early opportunity to make me understand that in conversation before strangers I was not to claim relationship with the Earl of Lascelles, nor on any account was I to speak of the circumstances of my mother's history."

"Doubtless the Earl was somewhat ashamed of his conduct towards his deceased sister?" remarked Christian: "and hence that injunction of secrecy and silence conveyed through the medium of those to whose care he had entrusted you."

"That was the conjecture which I also formed at the time," rejoined Isabella; "and I have no doubt it was the true one. I remained in the Rev. Mr. Hickman's family for nearly two years,—during which I was well treated; and as Mr. Hickman had daughters of my own age, and a governess to instruct them, my education was completed under the same tutelage. But Mr. Hickman died suddenly; and as he left his family but indifferently provided for, they had to go abroad, to accept a home that was offered them at the house of Mrs. Hickman's brother, who was a merchant or banker—I know not exactly which—residing on the Continent. The departure took place hurriedly after the funeral; and as I could not of course accompany them under such circumstances, it became necessary to find me another home. That was the first occasion on which I ever beheld the person who then called himself Mr. Gibson. He informed me that he was the Earl of Lascelles' confidential agent, and that he was empowered to provide for me temporarily, until my uncle should make up his mind in respect to other arrangements. Everything was done in a hurry; and by Mrs. Hickman's recommendation, a lodging was procured for me in the house of her deceased husband's clerk—where, Christian," added Isabella, with a soft blush, "we first met."

There was another pressure of the hand on the part of the enamoured youth; and he observed, "But the change from a residence with a genteel family to the abode of those coarse vulgar people——"

"I do not think it was altogether my uncle's fault," interrupted Isabella: "and I will presently explain wherefore. First of all I must tell you that the Earl's valet—whom I then knew only by the name of Gibson—repeated the injunction which I had originally received from Mrs. Hickman,—to the effect that I was never in my new home to make the slightest allusion to the Earl of Lascelles—never to speak of him as my uncle—never to mention that my deceased mother had belonged to a noble and titled family. He also informed me that I must on no account form any new acquaintances. Indeed, Makepeace spoke far more plainly on these subjects, and therefore less delicately, than Mrs. Hickman had formerly done: for he gave me to understand that if I violated his injunction—if I spoke of my uncle either in language of boasting or complaint—his lordship would abandon me altogether, and withdraw whatsoever he purposed to allow for my support."

"Ah, this was most cruel!" exclaimed Christian, his blood tingling with indignation: and he thought to himself that he should never again be able to endure the old Earl's presence with even an ordinary degree of patience.

"Yes—it was cruel," said Isabella: "for if my poor mother had mortally offended her relatives, it was not well for them to visit their rancour upon the head of her orphan daughter. However, I accepted my destiny with resignation: I promised to obey the injunction so earnestly given;—and now, Christian, you can comprehend wherefore it was that when you so kindly offered that your sister should pay me a visit, I was compelled to refuse—and yet I could give you no explanations! I need not speak of my experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Chubb: you know them—and you saw enough to be well aware that I could not possibly be happy beneath their roof. When Makepeace called——"

"And why, do you suppose, did he take an assumed name?" inquired Christian.

"Doubtless to render it all the more difficult—and indeed impossible—for the Chubbs to discover by whom he was employed. But as I was about to observe," continued the amiable Miss Vincent, "I occasionally asked him, when he called at the house, and I had an opportunity of speaking to him in private, whether my uncle intended me to live there altogether?—and he invariably replied that when his lordship had time to give his attention to the matter, some other arrangements should be made and something fixed with regard to my future career. Indeed, Makepeace hinted that it was possible a situation as governess, or as companion to a lady, would be found for me—and that therefore it was not worth while to remove me to any other place at present. Then, all of a sudden was I informed that my uncle had altered his mind entirely concerning me—that he meant to have me home—to acknowledge me as his niece—and to receive me with open arms. You know how abruptly I was borne away from beneath that roof where we first became acquainted. I must now add that on the morning after my arrival at this mansion, Makepeace—whose real name I had of course by that time discovered—sought an opportunity of speaking to me alone. He expressed a hope that I had always found his conduct perfectly respectful towards me; and he further hinted that it would be doing him a service if I did not mention to my uncle how meanly and humbly I was provided for at the parish-clerk's house. I had no inclination to commence my new career beneath the Earl's roof by making mischief, or vexing my uncle with complaints; and I therefore gave the assurance which set his mind at ease. But I suffered him to understand that I penetrated his motive in making the request,—and that though I pardoned him, I did not the less despise him."

"Ah, I comprehend," exclaimed Christian, indignantly: "the unscrupulous man had paid but a mere pittance on your behalf to the Chubbs', and self-appropriated the remainder of the allowance furnished from the Earl's purse!"

"There can be no doubt, Christian," answered Isabella, "that such was the conduct of Makepeace; and you understand wherefore I just now expressed my belief that the change from a comfortable home at the Hickmans' to a comparatively wretched one beneath the parish-clerk's roof, was not to be altogether ascribed to any unfeeling conduct on my uncle's part. And it is with pleasure I add that from the moment I set foot within these walls, I have received nothing but kindness at the hands of the amiable Countess: my cousin Adolphus treats me, as you see, with an attention courteously respectful; the Earl himself appears glad to have me with him—and in no sense have I been made to feel that I am in a state of dependence—much less that I am an interloper."

Thus terminated the young maiden's narrative; and as the dusk was now closing in, the two youthful lovers sought Lord Osmond and the Countess, that they might re-enter the mansion together. Those whom they thus sought, had likewise deemed it time to rejoin the Earl; and the party accordingly repaired to the drawing-room.

Two or three days elapsed; and still the Earl of Lascelles heard nothing of the hoped-for intimation that his son Adolphus had proposed for the hand of Miss Vincent. His lordship began to fear that his fine stroke of policy in respect to Isabella's presentation at Court, had failed to produce the desired effect upon Adolphus; and he was determined to bring matters to a solution and pack off Lord Osmond and Isabella to the hymeneal altar with the least possible delay. He therefore reflected upon what new step he should now take in order to bring about this consummation. He still felt persuaded that it could be nothing but diffidence on his son's part; and the current of his thoughts flowed in the following channel:—

"Perhaps, after all, the loves of my son and my niece have not made quite so much progress as I had anticipated. And really, considering that Adolphus is but a mere child,"—for the Earl would not even admit to himself that his son was a grown-up young man of three-and-twenty,—"he may be a mere puling schoolboy in the art of love. I will just satisfy myself on the point. I will ask that young Ashton to dine with us again to-day: they are all sure to walk out in the garden as usual in the evening—Ashton will of course bear the Countess company—Adolphus will roam apart with his cousin Isabella—and I will conceal myself amongst the evergreens, and just listen to what takes place between the young couple. They will of course talk of love; and I shall be enabled to judge to what point matters have reached,—

whether there is any chance of Adolphus soon popping the question—or whether he is so timid and bashful that he wants me to give him a helping hand."

The old Earl chuckled amazingly at this new scheme: he considered it to be another brilliant stroke of policy on his part;—but for a wonder he did not communicate it to Makepeace. He invited Christian to dine at his table that day; and every thing progressed as he could wish: for after the dessert, the usual walk in the garden was proposed, though at a somewhat later hour than heretofore. The Earl excused himself, as was his wont; and for about half-an-hour he sat drinking his wine and pondering the various matters he had in hand,—not forgetting his literary labours, which were progressing as rapidly as his own fertile imagination and Christian's fluent penmanship could possibly enable them to do.

The half-hour having elapsed, and the dusk coming on, the Earl of Lascelles issued from the mansion—struck into the shadiest avenue—and proceeding stealthily, came near one of the arbours which were interspersed about the grounds. He thought he heard voices speaking in gentle tones: he stopped and listened—he recognised Isabella's voice—but could not catch what she was saying. Noiselessly, as a serpent gliding amongst the trees and shrubs, did the Earl steal to the rear of that arbour; and there, inwardly chuckling at his astuteness and his cunning policy, he listened. The voices continued speaking in the same low tone as before; and love was assuredly the topic of their discourse. But gradually the suspicion stole into the Earl's mind that it was not precisely the voice of his son Adolphus which he heard in conversation with his beautiful niece. His lordship continued to listen with suspended breath, until he could no longer conceal from himself the suspicion—almost amounting to a conviction—that it was none other than Christian Ashton whom he thus heard in tender discourse with Isabella. The Earl was amazed—bewildered—petrified: he felt as if he were in a dream; and none of the fictitious adventures in his own forthcoming volumes, seemed half so marvellous as this reality. Whether he was standing on his head or his heels, the old nobleman had not a very clear conception. At length, as he began to awaken somewhat from his astoundment, he resolved to have ocular demonstration of the fact itself ere he proclaimed his presence: for the "optical delusion" in respect to his wife some weeks back, had made him particularly cautious how he took any rash step for the future.

Therefore, still as noiselessly as a serpent, did the Earl creep along round the arbour,—until he was close by the entrance of that dense umbrageous bower. It was now almost completely dusk; and the Earl, gently protruding his head, looked in. The lovers both at the same instant caught sight of a face thus peeping upon them through the obscurity: but they did not recognise it. Isabella gave a faint scream; and Christian—smitten with the conviction that it was a piece of impertinent curiosity on the part of the gardener whom he had a little while back seen in the grounds—darted forward and dealt the countenance such a vigorous blow that he sent the unfortunate old Earl sprawling back into the midst of a group of sweetbriar shrubs.

His lordship roared out with the pain: as well indeed he might—for the thorns had entered his person in all directions; and as he had a pair of light trousers on, it was particularly in the lower limbs that he suffered. Christian and Isabella at once comprehended that it was none other than the Earl himself who was the victim of this catastrophe. The young maiden was overwhelmed with confusion and dismay: the youth sprang forward to drag his lordship forth from the briars; and Lord Osmond at that moment rushed up to the spot. Hearing his father's cries, Adolphus had fancied there was something wrong; and he had accordingly urged the Countess to return to the mansion while he sped to see what was the matter.

"I am murdered, Adolphus!" exclaimed the Earl in a towering rage: "this young rascal has vowed to have my life——and he has been making love to your cousin Bella!"

"Most sincerely and humbly do I beseech your lordship's pardon," said Christian, "for the blow which I inflicted——"

"But my nose!" cried the Earl, rubbing his nasal promontory in a most ludicrous manner. "Be off with you, sir!—get out of my sight!—never cross my threshold again!—and whatever is due to you shall be forwarded to your lodging in the morning."

"I hope, my dear father," interposed Lord Osmond, "that you will deal leniently——"

"What! with this nose of mine all swollen and puffed up!—my good looks spoilt!" vociferated the Earl. "Where is the Countess?" he abruptly demanded.

"Oh, she has been in-doors for some time," replied Adolphus. "She complains of headache——"

"Ah, well," interrupted the Earl, satisfied that it was all right in that quarter: "the Countess acted prudently to go in-doors. Come, Bella, away with us at once! Take your cousin's arm——It is shocking of you to have listened to this jackanapes of a boy when you know that Adolphus——"

"Hush, my dear father!" hastily whispered the young nobleman: "poor Bella is dreadfully agitated! And you, Mr. Ashton," he added, now turning quickly to our hero, and speaking in a low hurried voice, "depart at once—your presence only irritates my father. Rest assured that I will do all I can to intercede in your behalf."

He wrung Christian's hand as he spoke—pushed the youth forward to hasten his departure—and then giving his arm to Isabella, whispered, "Cheer up, my dear cousin: we will see what can be done for the best!"

But Isabella was weeping bitterly; and on regaining the house, she hurried up to her own chamber,—where she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction. Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles repaired to his dressing-room, to detail his grievances to Makepeace, and to have a poultice applied to his nose, which was somewhat swollen from the effects of the blow so vigorously dealt by Christian.

On the following morning Lord Osmond called upon our hero at his lodgings; and with much real sorrow informed him that though both the Countess and himself had pleaded their utmost with the Earl on Christian's behalf, they had found him inexorable. Lord Osmond therefore counselled the youth to look out for another situation, and offered to render him any service that lay in his power. Christian bashfully expressed the hope that Miss Vincent would not suffer in her uncle's estimation; and it was a solace to him, in the midst of his affliction, to learn that his lordship had expressed no particular views with regard to his niece; but had merely hinted that he should keep a sharp eye upon her for the future.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE VISIT TO THE REGENT'S PARK.

MEANWHILE Christina had been for a few weeks fulfilling the light and pleasing duties which she had to perform towards the Princess Indora. These consisted chiefly in reading to her Highness—in practising music with her—and assisting her researches into the historical records and the institutions of the British Empire. The Princess treated her precisely as Lady Octavian Meredith had done: namely, as a friend and as an equal; so that our youthful heroine experienced not the slightest sense of a dependent position. She took all her repasts with the Princess, and rode out with her in the carriage. Now that the fine weather had returned, they walked in the garden of an evening; and the more Christina saw of the King of Inderabad's daughter, the greater was the esteem she experienced towards her.

Christina had, on her first visit to the secluded villa-residence, been astonished at the mingled sumptuousness and elegance of that abode, which appeared to realise all her dream-like notions of oriental splendour, or of those miniature palaces whereof we read in fairy tales. But far more was she amazed by the magnificent beauty of the Princess and the dark splendour of Sagoonah's charms. Indeed, everything connected with this retreat of the oriental exotics was fraught with interest and novelty for the young maiden. Not the slightest idea had she of the motive which had brought the Princess to England: nor had she the least suspicion that Mr. Redcliffe had ever crossed that threshold. On the day that she first applied for the situation, Indora had confidentially informed her that her real rank was that of a Princess; but that in order as much as possible to avert public curiosity, she concealed her high position and passed merely as an oriental lady of fortune. Christina had mentioned Zoe's name as that of one to whom reference could be made if requisite; and Indora—perceiving from the way in which Christina spoke, that she was on intimate terms with Zoe—gave her permission to mention confidentially the real rank of the lady into whose household she was about to enter. Thus there was no breach of trust on Christina's part in stating that much to Lady Octavian Meredith.

For an hour or two every day, the Princess Indora shut herself up in that exquisitely appointed boudoir which we described on the first occasion that we introduced her to the reader; and there she employed herself in examining a portion of twenty enormous volumes which were piled up in the room, and which consisted of files of the *Times* for as many years as there were volumes. Once or twice during the first two or three weeks of her residence beneath that roof, Christina had occasion to enter the boudoir to speak to the Princess; and she found her poring over the leaves of those files with a most earnest intentness. The young maiden however attached no importance to the circumstance—but simply ascribed it to that love of instruction which the Princess displayed in all matters that concerned the affairs of Great Britain.

One day, as Christina entered the sumptuously furnished drawing-room, she perceived a note lying upon the carpet; and fancying that it was some stray piece of paper of no consequence—but that it ought not to be left to mar the exquisite neatness with which the apartment was kept—she picked it up. A glance however at the paper showed that it was a letter; and without reading even a single word of it, she placed it upon the table. At that very instant the Princess Indora entered; and Christina, presenting her the note, said, "I found this lying upon the carpet."

The oriental lady's superb eyes appeared to recognise it at a glance; and for a moment there was a gentle flush sweeping over the delicate duskiness of her countenance. Christina beheld it; and mistaking its cause, said somewhat proudly, "Your ladyship" (for the title of Highness was not used beneath that roof) "cannot possibly think that I would violate the sanctity of your letter."

"No, my dear Christina," exclaimed Indora, with the enthusiasm of generous frankness: "not for a single moment could I do you such injustice! Besides, after all," she added, as if she thought it necessary to account for whatsoever change of features might have inspired our heroine with that misapprehension: "there is nothing in this note that you may not see. I received it some months back, as you will observe by the date."

Thus speaking, the Princess opened the letter; and handing it to Christina, bade her read it. Miss Ashton obeyed; and with considerable surprise read the following lines:—

"Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square,
"January 11, 1848.

"Mr. Redcliffe presents his most dutiful regards to her Highness the Princess of Inderabad, and begs to inform her it has come to his knowledge that some evil-disposed persons may probably seek to inveigle her Highness or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare, for purposes to which Mr. Redcliffe will not farther allude. He however deems it his duty thus to put her Highness upon her guard; and if instructions be issued that no communication is to be held by her Highness's dependants with strangers, every needful precaution will have been adopted.

"Her Highness the Princess of Inderabad."

The moment she caught sight of the address from which the note was dated, and of the name of Redcliffe, an expression of surprise appeared upon Christina's countenance: but this deepened into alarm as she continued the perusal of the letter. The Princess failed not to observe the effect which it produced upon her; and perceiving that the surprise was something apart from the announcement contained in the note itself, she said, "What thus strikes you, my young friend?"

"Simply," responded Christina, "that I have some little acquaintance with the gentleman who penned this billet: and my brother—who has occasionally visited me here, with your ladyship's kind permission—is far more intimate with him."

"Indeed! you know Mr. Redcliffe?" said Indora, subduing as well as she was able the thrilling trepidation which she ever felt on breathing that name.

Christina proceeded to explain how she herself had once lodged in the same house where the note was dated—and how, on subsequently meeting Mr. Redcliffe, she had been enabled to interest him in the case of the poor seamstress, Mary Wright. She went on to expatiate on Mr. Redcliffe's bounty towards that unfortunate creature,—showing how delicately yet unostentatiously his ministrations were rendered until she sank into the eternal sleep of death. Indora listened with the deepest inward interest: but she had sufficient guard over herself to prevent her countenance from betraying all she felt.

"And that was not the only good deed on Mr. Redcliffe's part that has come to my knowledge," continued Christina. "Through him the dreadful purposes of a wicked husband towards an amiable and innocent wife, were completely frustrated; and I am proud to reflect that my brother Christian played no insignificant part on the side of justice and virtue."

"Tell me this narrative," said the Princess: "the little you have already spoken on the subject interests me."

Christina accordingly entered upon the recital of those incidents which are so well known to the reader, and the full particulars of which she had received from her brother's lips. In the course of her history, it became necessary to speak of the pond by the side of the road, in the vicinage of Oaklands, where the murder had been committed nearly nineteen years back;—and to the entire narrative did the Princess listen with the utmost attention.

"No wonder that the young woman Letitia Rodney," remarked Indora, "should have been so overwhelmed with horror when accosted by Mr. Redcliffe by the side of that pond in the deep darkness of the night!"

"The tragedy which took place there so many years ago," rejoined Christina, "was a very dreadful one. My brother Christian read the account in a piece of an old newspaper when he was first in the employment of the Duke of Marchmont."

"And did he recite to you all the particulars?" asked the Princess.

"Briefly so," responded Christina. "Yes—it was a sad tale—full of a romantic and fearful interest: but it has left a dread stigma upon the names of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian."

The Princess Indora rose from her seat and advanced towards the window, from which she gazed forth in silence for two or three minutes. At length again turning towards Christina, she said, "Our conversation has flowed into a channel which has interested me. I have a complete file of a London newspaper in the boudoir: you are far more expert than I am in everything which relates to the concerns of your own country:—will you endeavour to find for me the accounts of the particular tragedy of which you have been speaking?"

"With pleasure," answered our heroine: and away she tripped to the boudoir,—the Princess shortly afterwards following. Christina referred to the volume which contained the set of newspapers for the year 1829; and she had little difficulty in discovering the accounts of the appalling tragedy at Oaklands. They ran through several numbers; and even for weeks and months after it occurred, there were occasional paragraphs referring to it, and chronicling the various surmises that were abroad at the time in respect to what had become of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian. All these did Christina mark with ink, so as to be more easy of reference for the Princess Indora; and having finished her task, she was about to retire,—when Sagoonah entered, bearing a letter addressed to the young maiden. The volume of the *Times* which she had been searching, lay open upon the table: the ayah's dark eyes glanced for an instant towards it, as if in wonder at the colossal subject of her Royal mistress's and her youthful companion's studies: she presented the letter with that graceful inclination of the form which showed all its willowy and bayadere-like elasticity to such advantage—and then withdrew.

Christina instantaneously recognised the handwriting of Lady Octavian Meredith; and she passed into the drawing-room to peruse the letter. Therein Zoe informed her that though her health had improved since Christina left, it was not yet sufficiently re-established to enable her to fulfil her promise of calling upon her at the Princess Indora's residence: but she begged our heroine to come and pass a few hours with her on the following day,—adding that she should be otherwise altogether alone, as Lord Octavian had promised to spend the whole of that day with his father the Marquis of Penshurst. Christina could not help thinking that there was a certain significancy in this latter notification, and that it was meant as an assurance that she might in all safety accept the invitation without the fear of encountering Meredith. The young girl caught a sigh rising up in her throat: but by a strong and hasty effort she subdued it; and though in the solitude of her own chamber, she blushed at this half-betrayal of her own weakness unto herself. To divert her thoughts into a new channel, she sped back to the boudoir,—where she found the Princess deeply engaged in the perusal of the newspaper-volume which Christina had marked for the purpose. The young maiden handed Zoe's letter to her Highness: and when the Princess had read it, she said, with her wonted amiability, "I understand, my young friend, that you seek my permission to accept her ladyship's invitation. It is cheerfully accorded; and the carriage shall be at your disposal tomorrow."

Christina thanked the Princess for her kindness; and returning to her own chamber, she penned a note to Lady Octavian Meredith, to the effect that she would be with her at noon on the following day. The approaching visit naturally brought recent incidents back to the young maiden's mind with some degree of vividness. She was almost certain that Zoe either suspected or else positively knew her husband's passion: for this alone could explain the tacit readiness with which Zoe consented to separate from our heroine—or at least how it was that she did not offer any serious remonstrance. And now, perhaps, the reader may wonder whether Christina had acquainted her brother with the circumstances which had led to her change of situation. Yes: the young maiden had spoken frankly to Christian—and had described all that had occurred: but she did not even hint that her own feelings were not altogether so indifferent as she knew they ought to be with regard to Lord Octavian. Her virginal modesty would not permit her to avow even to the ear of an affectionate brother that which she would not admit unto herself: for though there was the suspicion—at times more distinct than at others—in her mind that Lord Octavian's love had not proved entirely displeasing to her, she endeavoured to banish that suspicion—she did all that she could to crush it—and whenever she found the handsome young nobleman's image stealing into her thoughts, she at once strove to turn them completely into some other channel.

In the evening, when seated at the dinner table with the Princess Indora, Christina observed, "The conversation with your ladyship this morning changed to a topic which so engrossed our attention, that I had not the opportunity of expressing my hope that Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was never justified by any actual attempts of the nature to which he alluded?"

"Immediately on the receipt of it," responded the Princess, "I gave to the faithful Mark"—thus alluding to her steward and major-domo—"the instructions which Mr. Redcliffe had himself suggested. Two or three persons—male and female—had been noticed by Mark lurking about in the neighbourhood; and they endeavoured to enter into conversation with him: but he treated them with so chilling a reserve that they saw they had nothing to gain in that quarter. During the last two or three months I have heard no more of such attempts to pry into my proceedings."

"Is it possible that your Highness has enemies in this country?" asked Christina, with the most perfect ingenuousness: for her pure mind, as inexperienced as it was artless, entertained not the slightest notion as to what the snare could be into which it was sought to inveigle the Princess and Sagoonah.

"No—thank heaven, I fear not enemies!" answered the Princess. "But you, my sweet young friend, comprehend not as yet that there are persons wicked enough in this world to spread nets for the feet of others:"—and having thus spoken, the oriental lady gave the conversation an immediate turn—not however with abruptness, but in a way that seemed perfectly natural.

Precisely at noon on the following day, Christina alighted from the carriage at the Merediths' habitation in the Regent's Park; and as it was already arranged that the equipage was to return to fetch her at four, she had no fresh orders to give—and the vehicle was at once borne away again by the handsomely caparisoned pair attached to it. In a few moments the young maiden found herself clasped in the arms of Zoe.

Lady Octavian received Christina in the drawing-room: she looked pale and languid; and our heroine was distressed to perceive that her beloved friend was yet some distance from complete restoration to health. Zoe questioned her in the kindest manner as to her new position; and she expressed her delight to hear that Christina was so happy with the Princess of Inderabad. An hour thus passed while they were in conversation together; and during the whole time Lady Octavian never once mentioned the name of her husband. There was however nothing pointed in this avoidance of such mention: it might or it might not have been a mere accident arising from the circumstance that the conversation flowed in channels rendering any allusion to Lord Octavian perfectly unnecessary. Refreshments were served up: but scarcely was the luncheon-tray removed, when his lordship's well-known knock was heard at the front door. Christina recognised it in a moment: she was thrown off her guard—she started—she blushed—she was filled with confusion.

"It is Lord Octavian," said Zoe, in a quiet tone: and yet it struck Christina, as she glanced towards her friend, that a slight tremulousness was visible in her frame. "He must either have changed his mind in respect to passing the day with his father: or else the Marquis must have some other engagement which prevents him from entertaining his son."

While Zoe was thus speaking, Christina had leisure to recover somewhat from her confusion; and she felt the necessity of retaining all her self-possession. She was about to hint that she must now return to Bayswater, when she recollected that she had ordered the carriage to return not until four in the afternoon; and she therefore immediately perceived that were she now to depart abruptly, it would be admitting to Zoe that she attached a significancy to the circumstance of Lord Octavian's unexpected presence. For though she had little doubt in her own mind that Zoe had more or less penetrated the circumstance which led to her removal to another home,—yet it was one of those things concerning which the pure minds of two friends could not very readily show that they had any tacit but mutual understanding.

While all these thoughts were sweeping through Christina's mind, Lord Octavian's well-known footsteps were ascending the stairs: they approached the drawing-room door—and he entered. Fortunately he had heard from the footman who gave him admission, that Miss Ashton was with her ladyship; and therefore he was not taken by surprise on finding Christina there. Ah! but he should not have entered the drawing-room at all, while thus knowing whom he was destined to meet! He had even said so to himself while ascending the stairs: yet an irresistible impulse urged him on; and though conscience told him that he was doing wrong, inclination was stronger than conscience!

Assuming an air of mere friendly courtesy, he advanced to Christina, proffering his hand: she hesitatingly gave him hers—he retained it for a single moment—and having exchanged with her the usual compliments of courtesy, sat down close by Zoe's easy-chair.

"You did not expect my return so soon, dearest Zoe," he said, as if endeavouring to concentrate the greater part of his attention upon his wife:

"nor did I, when leaving you in the morning, think that I should see you again until the evening. But my father was called into the country on unforeseen business scarcely an hour ere I arrived; and then I received a message requesting me to postpone my visit till the day after to-morrow."

"I hope it is nothing unpleasant?" said Zoe, with that amiable placidity and soft mournfulness which had characterised her tone and manner ever since the accident that led to her illness.

"No—nothing of any great consequence," answered Octavian,—"merely a suddenly discovered defalcation in the accounts of his bailiff: but it is to no serious amount."

The young nobleman then proceeded, with well-bred facility, to glide into a conversation on general topics,—and in which Zoe bore her part, if not with cheerfulness, at least with an apparent interest: though Christina could not help thinking it was really to prevent the discourse from flagging and thereby causing embarrassment to perhaps all three. The young maiden herself spoke but little: the mere necessity of keeping continuously on her guard, so as not to betray that sense of awkwardness that she inwardly and strongly felt, was at times hurrying her to the very brink of confusion. She sat with her eyes bent down, or else with her looks averted in another direction from the spot where Lord Octavian was seated. She did not choose to meet his regards. Not that she in this respect mistrusted herself: it was impossible for that pure-minded girl to display any significancy of look under such circumstances: but she knew not how Octavian might gaze upon her, or into what increased embarrassment and awkwardness he might plunge her.

Thus half-an-hour passed: Christina glanced at the time-piece—still two more hours must elapse ere the carriage would come! Did Lord Octavian intend to remain in the drawing-room the whole time? It appeared so. All of a sudden Zoe directed Christina's attention to a portfolio of new and splendid prints which lay upon the table; and the young maiden, infinitely relieved—and half suspecting that Zoe meant purposely thus to relieve her—hastened to look over them. In doing this, she seated herself in such a way that without absolutely turning her back in rudeness towards Octavian, she nevertheless could without restraint avoid meeting his looks. By these means another hour was passed; and then Zoe requested Christina to favour her with an air upon the piano. The young maiden was compelled to advance towards the instrument: but she did so with a visible embarrassment; and Lady Octavian suddenly exclaimed, "No, my dear Christina: it is too bad that I should thus task you when you come to visit me out of friendship—and we have so short a time to be together!"

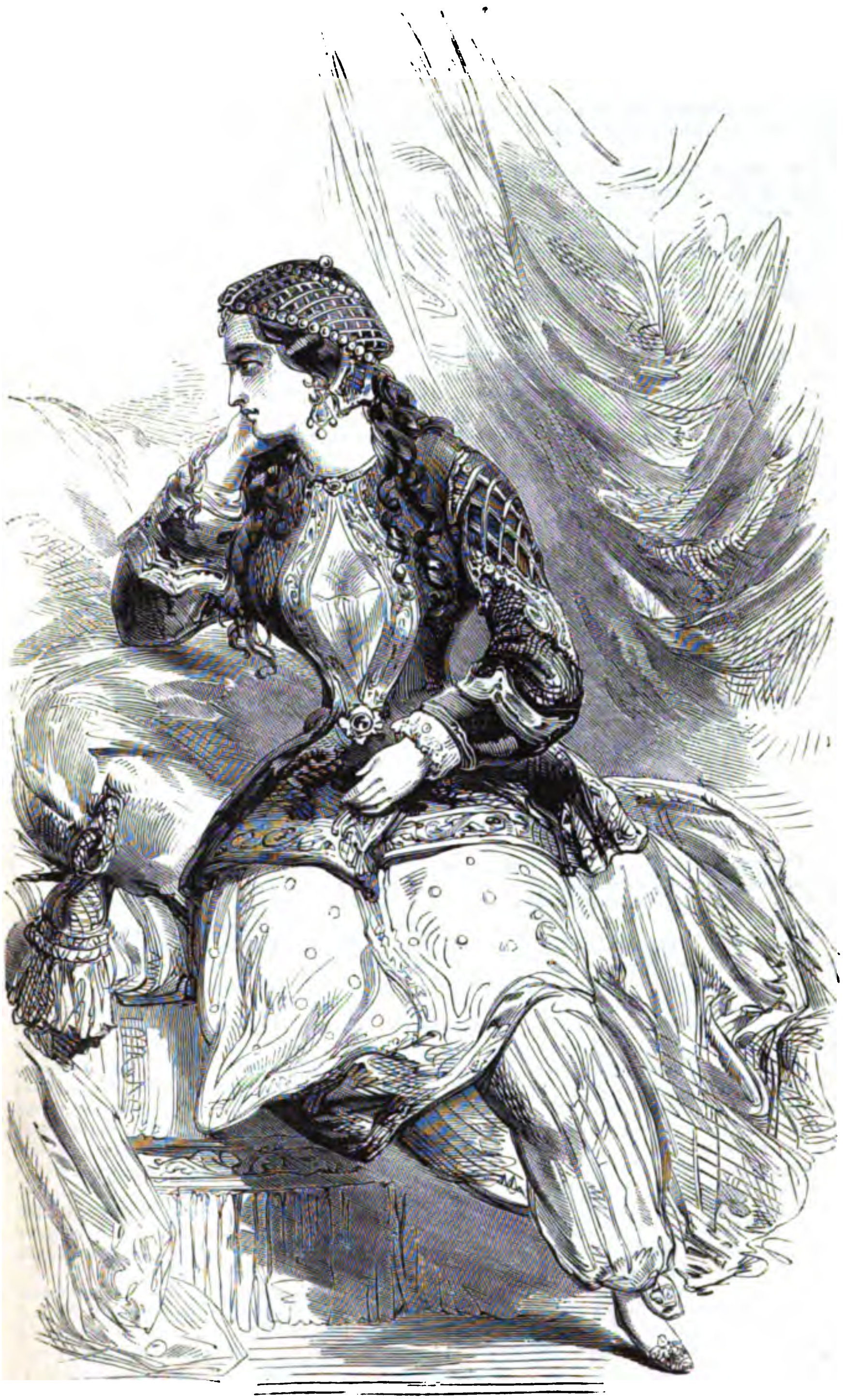
"I see," said Lord Octavian, rising from his seat, and endeavouring to smile—though the attempt was but a sickly one after all—"that I am one too many here: but I know that you ladies have your little secrets. I shall bid you farewell, Miss Ashton."

Again he presented his hand: again hers was given hesitatingly: he held it but for a moment—and then somewhat hurriedly quitted the room. Christina resumed her seat close by Zoe; and it struck her at the moment that the amiable lady was forcing herself to suppress a sigh. At that same instant, too, our heroine's gentle bosom was so full of emotion that she could have thrown herself into her friend's arms and given vent to her feelings with a gush of tears. But by a mighty effort she conquered this weakness. Zoe at once glided into conversation again; and her manner was, if possible, more kind and more sweetly affable than ever towards Christina. At length the carriage came; and when the two friends was about to part, Zoe said, "I am in hope, dearest Christina, to be enabled to return this visit in a very short time:" but she did *not* add that if this hope were disappointed, she should expect our heroine to renew her own visit to the Regent's Park.

They embraced warmly, and separated. Christina was half afraid of finding Lord Octavian down stairs in order to hand her to the carriage: but he was not there—and she took her way back towards Bayswater. While seated in the vehicle, she reviewed every incident which had occurred within the last four hours. Scarcely a doubt remained in her mind as to the fact that Zoe had penetrated her husband's secret: and now a reminiscence suddenly flitted into Christina's brain. She wondered that she had not thought of it before! For, on that day when the accident with the phaeton occurred, it had struck her for an instant that she beheld Zoe's eyes suddenly close as she turned towards her immediately after those passionate exclamations had burst from Octavian's lips. Ah! doubtless Zoe's ear had caught them!—they had revealed to her the secret of her husband's love for another!—and if Zoe had really thus known it all along, it would account for the entire tenour of the admirable lady's conduct since that moment which struck a fatal blow to her happiness.

"Good heavens!" thought Christina to herself, shuddering and shivering at the bare idea that her surmise was correct; "what a sacrifice of feeling is the generous-hearted Zoe making in every way! She knows her husband's unlawful and disastrous love—she knows that I, though heaven can tell how unwittingly, am its object—and yet she does not hate me! No: she is too magnanimous! And she will not make her husband blush in her presence by suffering him to perceive that she has penetrated his secret. Perhaps she pities him,—perhaps she feels for him, making allowances for a heart that has no power over its own volition? And now she is cherishing this secret—she locks it up in her own bosom—she studies by every action, word, and look, to excite the belief that she suspects it not! Admirable Zoe! Ah, no wonder that there is sadness in her tone—soft plaintiveness in her looks: for these it is impossible she can altogether control!"

And then, while still seated in the carriage which was bearing her homewards, Christina wept scalding tears of anguish,—wept as if she herself were a wilfully guilty destructrix of the amiable Zoe's happiness!



INDORA.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE MILLINER.

But in the meanwhile, let us see what had taken place at the villa-residence of the Princess Indora.

The carriage left that house at about three o'clock in order to reach the Regent's Park at the hour appointed to fetch Christina home; and Mark, the steward, went with it as far as Oxford Street, as he had several purchases to make on behalf of the household which he superintended. Sagoonah issued forth as if to walk in the garden; and her tall, lithe, supple form, arrayed in the white garments of an ayah, was lost amidst the avenues of embowering trees. There was a strange expression in Sagoonah's lustrous eyes: they seemed to burn with an unearthly light;—a mingled fierceness and satisfaction hovered in their luminous depths, defying all power of description. Her lips of vivid scarlet were at first compressed as if with the resoluteness of some settled purpose: but on reaching the extremity of the garden, where it was bounded by a close fence separating it from a field, the ayah paused to listen: and then her thin bright lips, parting with the hushed state of suspense, revealed her teeth of ivory whiteness and purity. The finely modelled bust, which the white garment only partially concealed—and which in its round and well-divided contours, unsupported by corset, resembled sculptured marble of a dusky hue—remained upheaved with that same suspense. Then she advanced through the shrubs; and looked over the fence. She perceived a female very handsomely dressed, and carrying a large brown paper parcel in her hands, loitering about in the field. Sagoonah, on catching that female's eye, made an imperious sign for her to advance: the woman hastened to obey it, and came close up under the fence.

"Why were you not here at the moment?" demanded the ayah angrily: and though she spoke in broken English, yet her language was perfectly comprehensible.

"I was fearful of approaching too close up to the fence," was the well-dressed female's response: and she likewise spoke the English tongue in a manner which proved her to be a foreigner.

"And yet I sent word by your spy this forenoon," rejoined Sagoonah, "that you were to be here punctually at a quarter past three. However, it is of little consequence since you *are* here. Go round boldly to the front door—I will give you admittance—you are certain to obtain an interview with her ladyship—and you must *then* manage according to your own ingenuity."

As she uttered these last words, Sagoonah's eyes flashed again with a fierce unnatural brilliancy,—as if from the present proceeding she anticipated some grand triumph for herself.

"Is there nothing to be apprehended?" inquired the female with the parcel.

"Nothing," responded Sagoonah. "As I sent you word in the morning, the men-servants were sure to be out with the carriage—and Mark had arranged to go up into London to make purchases."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah glided away from the vicinage of the fence, and re-entered the house; while the woman with whom she had been conversing, passed round to the front door. Her summons thereat was promptly answered by Sagoonah, who admitted her into the hall, and pretended to remain conversing with her a few minutes, as if to learn what her business might be. Then the ayah proceeded to the drawing-room, where her mistress was reclining upon one of the luxuriant ottomans; and with the wonted graceful inclination of her form when addressing the Princess, or any other person whom she had to regard as a superior, she said, "May it please your ladyship, the milliner has called."

"The milliner, Sagoonah?" exclaimed Indora: "I do not expect any such person. It must be a mistake."

"It does not appear to be a mistake, lady," rejoined the ayah: "for the woman speaks with the confidence of one who knows that she is right."

"Then let her come hither," answered the Princess; "and I will ascertain what her proceeding can mean."

Sagoonah bowed again, and issued from the apartment. Descending to the hall, she bent a significant look with the lustrous flashing of her eyes upon the woman who was waiting there, and whom we may as well at once announce to our reader to be none other than Madame Angelique herself.

This infamous creature followed Sagoonah to the drawing-room; and as she entered the ayah closed the door behind her. Madame Angelique —who had now personally taken in hand a business for which none of her spies nor agents had hitherto appeared competent—had seen Indora when riding in her carriage or walking in her garden; and therefore knew that she was beautiful. But now that she beheld her close, she was perfectly amazed by the mingled grandeur and enchanting magnificence of those charms which she thus contemplated. Nor less too was she astonished by the elegance, the richness, and the sumptuousness of the apartment itself. Self-possessed as the wily woman was, and generally having all her wits about her, Madame Angelique was for a few moments bewildered and astounded by the fairy scene which she beheld and the oriental houri who was its presiding genius. Indora, with her accustomed affability, gave the woman an encouraging smile: for she perceived her astonishment, and she imagined her to be respectable. Indeed, it had not for a moment entered the mind of the Princess that the visitress could be a female of infamous description, or that she was one of those very persons against whom Mr. Redcliffe's warning-letter was directed.

"I am told that you are a milliner," said Indora: "but I think that there must be some mistake, as I have not sent for any one of that description."

"Your ladyship will, I hope, pardon my intrusion," replied Madame Angelique. "I did not tell your domestic that I was sent for: but the young woman understands English so indifferently, and I myself speak it with such little accuracy, that the error arose from these circumstances."

"Ah, then," said Indora, with a glitter of suspicion for a moment appearing in her eyes, "you have called of your own accord?"

"I have taken that liberty, my lady," replied Madame Angelique, assuming her blandest smile and her most coaxingly affable demeanour. "The truth is, I go my rounds amongst ladies of fashion, and wealth—and beauty," she added, glancing with admiring significancy at Indora's splendid countenance: "I display pieces of the newest and most exquisite materials——"

"I am obliged to you for including me amongst the number," interrupted the Princess: "but I require nothing of the sort at present—nor indeed at all."

Indora made a movement as if to indicate that the woman might withdraw: but Madame Angelique was not to be so easily disposed of.

"Pray bear with me for a few minutes, gracious lady," she said; "and I will show you so rare and choice a material that I am convinced your ladyship will be ravished with it. I work for some of the highest ladies in the land: for instance, the Marchioness of Trevelyan—the Countess of Mordaunt—the Countess of Lascelles—the Duchess of Marchmont——"

"Ah, you work for the Duchess of Marchmont?" said Indora.

"Yes, my lady," responded Madame Angelique, inwardly delighted to think that she should thus have succeeded in enlisting the interest of the Princess. "I have been with the Duchess this very day:"—it was however a monstrous falsehood which she uttered, inasmuch as Lavinia had not employed her since the discovery relative to the duplicate dresses: but if she had said she had seen the Duke that day, it would have been perfectly correct.

"Are the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont in London now?" inquired the Princess.

"They are at their mansion in Belgrave Square," rejoined Madame Angelique.

"I have heard of their splendid seat of Oaklands," resumed Indora: "and should like much to see it."

"Dear me, how extraordinary!" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with well-feigned astonishment. "I can easily become the means of gratifying your ladyship's curiosity—and shall be proud and happy to do so."

"Indeed! How?" exclaimed the Princess, with visible interest depicted on her magnificent countenance.

"His Grace the Duke of Marchmont is accustomed to treat me quite in a familiar manner," responded the wily Frenchwoman, who could scarcely conceal her mingled surprise and joy that matters should thus be taking a turn which seemed so favourable to her own atrocious designs. "You see, my lady, I have worked some years for the Duchess; and the Duke takes such pride in beholding his wife well dressed, that he seems to fancy he can never sufficiently display his gratitude towards the French *artiste* who furnishes her Grace's toilet:—and that *artiste* is your ladyship's humble servant," added Madame Angelique with a low curtsey.

"I understand," observed Indora: "the Duke is kind to you—and if you ask him a favour, would grant it?"

"Your ladyship has only anticipated what I was about to say," rejoined the infamous woman. "Ah, my lady! Oaklands is a most beautiful place. Such magnificent grounds—gardens so exquisitely laid out—superb aviaries, fountains, and statues—ponds with gold and silver fish—ornamental water, with stately swans floating on its surface—conservatories of the choicest fruits and flowers,—it is a perfect paradise! And then, too, the interior of the mansion itself—its sumptuous apartments—the delicious views it commands—and its splendid picture-gallery,—I am sure, my lady, that with your exquisite taste, and with your love of the beautiful," continued Madame Angelique, glancing around the drawing-room, "you would be delighted with a few days' residence in that charming place."

"Your description has indeed excited my curiosity," observed Indora; "and I should much like to pay a few hours' visit to Oaklands."

"A few hours, my lady!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "I am confident that if I said but a single word—and you would so far honour me as to bid me say that word on your behalf—I could obtain permission for your ladyship to make Oaklands your home for a week or a fortnight. The Duke and Duchess are not there; and you would be undisturbed mistress of the mansion."

"But it would be a most extraordinary request to make on the part of a perfect stranger," said the Princess.

"Nothing extraordinary, when that stranger is an oriental lady of rank and fortune. Besides," added Madame Angelique, "these things are frequently done in England; so that the Duke and Duchess would be delighted to place their mansion at your ladyship's disposal for a short period."

"I am exceedingly indebted to you for this assurance," answered Indora: "and I am almost inclined to accept your courteous offer. Open that parcel, and show me the contents."

Madame Angelique did as she was directed, and exhibited four or five superb pieces of dress-material,—each piece containing the requisite quantity to be made up into costume.

"What are the prices of these?" asked Indora.

Madame Angelique named the specific sums, inwardly chuckling the while at the prospect of succeeding in the object of her mission, in comparison with which she cared little for the sale of her costly materials,—which indeed, as the reader may suppose, she had only brought with her as a blind.

"I will purchase them all," said Indora: and drawing forth a purse from beneath the immense velvet cushion on which she was half reclining, she counted forth the sum in Bank of England notes.

"Your ladyship will perhaps permit me to make up these materials after the European fashion?" said Madame Angelique. "Pardon me for the compliment—but your ladyship would look as well in such apparel as in that sweetly picturesque costume which your ladyship now wears."

"No: leave these pieces here," replied Indora. "But you may make me three or four dresses of a far more simple character—such, for instance, as English ladies ordinarily wear. You may furnish me likewise with bonnets and shawls to match: for if I am really to pay this visit to Oaklands, I must appear there in a garb which will avert the gaze of disagreeable curiosity."

"I understand, my lady," answered Madame Angelique. "I have your exquisite form so completely in my mind's eye, that no measurement is necessary; and I am confident of being enabled to afford your ladyship the completest satisfaction. Indeed, such faultless contours as your ladyship's——"

"But look you!" interrupted Indora: "I have my own reasons for desiring all this to be contrived with some little privacy. In short, when I return to my native land, I would not have it known that I had even for a few days assumed the national garb of English ladies. Therefore come not yourself again to this house: but when the costumes are in readiness, forward them to me, packed in boxes. Send me your account by the post; and I will remit you a draft for the payment. At the same time that you will have occasion thus to communicate with me, you can let me know whether you have been enabled——"

"To obtain the ducal permission for your ladyship to make a short sojourn at Oaklands?" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Oh, I can take it upon myself to give your ladyship a most positive assurance upon the point! And at the same time that I have the honour of communicating with your ladyship, I will furnish instructions relative to the route which is to be taken to Oaklands, should your ladyship proceed thither in a private manner by post-chaise—which will be the better means of conveyance."

"I am really obliged to you," responded Indora, "for all the kind interest you are thus displaying towards the gratification of the whim which I have conceived. Probably in a week or ten days I shall hear from you?"

"Assuredly so, my lady," replied Madame Angelique.

Indora now, by a gesture, intimated that the audience was at an end; and the Frenchwoman carried herself by dint of a continuous series of curtsies towards the door. But perhaps, if she had observed as she closed that door behind herself the singular expression which swept over the superb countenance of the oriental lady, she would have had some misgiving as to the real meaning of Indora's conduct throughout this proceeding: for it was an expression of such mingled scorn, contempt, triumphant satisfaction, all so strangely blended as scarcely to be definable in words.

Madame Angelique found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford her egress; and the rapid significant look which the wily woman bent upon the ayah, conveyed to the latter an intimation of complete success. Then Sagoonah's naturally lustrous eyes, flashed still more brilliant fires—but assuredly not alone with a gratified greed experienced on account of the gold which Madame Angelique thrust into her hand. Indeed, the Frenchwoman herself could not comprehend the luminous strangeness of the ayah's looks; and for a moment they troubled her as if with a sort of vague and unknown terror. Yes—and even as she hurried away from the villa-residence,—and while chuckling too at the success of her scheme with regard to that oriental lady of an almost fabulous beauty,—she felt as if she were still followed by the wild influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PRISONER.

It was now the beginning of June; and three months had elapsed since the dreadful murder of Mr. Pollard at Liverpool. The Spring Assizes had passed without seeing Lettice Rodney brought to trial: but as there was to be a Summer Assize holden, it was expected she would on this occasion appear before the jury. The reason for the postponement of the trial at the first-mentioned assizes, was the serious illness of the prisoner. It was however rumoured that she was not altogether without friends,—that eminent counsel had been engaged in her behalf—and that Sir William Stanley, a wealthy Baronet residing in the neighbourhood, and who was in the commission of the peace, had exhibited much interest in her behalf. Still the general impression appeared to be that she was guilty,—the details of the circumstantial evidence telling so fearfully against her. Sir William Stanley, however, seemed to be an exception to the rule; and so far as his friends could judge from the few words he let drop on the subject, and the peculiarity of his look when it was broached in his presence, it was believed that *he* at least was not so strongly impressed by that evidence, even if he did not go so far as to imagine her completely innocent.

Lettice Rodney had indeed been seriously ill. The terrible accusation which pressed against her—the weight of the testimony upon which she was committed—had almost completely crushed her. If really guilty of the crime, she would have perhaps borne herself more courageously than she did when, being conscious of her innocence, she thus lay under an imputation of the blackest turpitude. After her committal for trial, she was for many weeks in a state bordering upon dissolution,—sometimes raving in the delirium of fever, at others sinking into a torpor so profound that it appeared as if it were the high road leading to the portals of death's mansion. She was lodged during this severe illness in the infirmary of the gaol; and every attention was shown her by the official authorities and the medical men. To a certain extent this humane treatment would have been displayed towards her without the prompting of any external influence, and notwithstanding the fearful crime with which she was charged: but those attentions had been perhaps all the more indulgent on account of the intervention of Sir William Stanley on the young woman's behalf. The Baronet nevertheless suffered it to be understood, for his own character's sake, that he had no previous acquaintance with Lettice Rodney, and that he was actuated by mere motives of humanity, —an averment which was fully supported by his reputation for the highest honour and integrity. We should observe that Sir William Stanley was a man of about sixty: all the early part of his life had been passed in India, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and by the services rendered to the Government in a variety of ways had obtained the title of Baronet. He was a widower, but had one son—a young man of about four-and-twenty, and who was a captain in a cavalry regiment. We must further observe that circumstances had induced Sir William Stanley to revisit India some three years previous to the date of which we are now writing, and that he had only returned to England about a twelvemonth back.

It was the first week in June—and in a chamber communicating with the female infirmary of the Liverpool gaol, Lettice Rodney sat. How changed was her appearance from that glory and bloom of beauty which had invested her ere she found herself charged with the tremendous crime of murder! But terrible are the ravages which those joint scourges—care and illness—are enabled to effect upon the human form; and the most blighting influence of the former as well as the fiercest rage of the latter had wreaked themselves upon the unfortunate Lettice Rodney. Her shape, once so voluptuous in its superb proportions, had become emaciated: her cheeks, once so plump and with the roseate bloom of health upon them, had grown sunken and deadly pale; her eyes, deep in their cavernous orbits, had lost their fire; and the ashy lips received an added ghastliness from the fine white teeth. And her look too—Oh, how profoundly sad it was! That countenance which had been wont to beam with sunny smiles, or to glow with the flush of sensuous passion, now seemed to be the tombstone of a perished heart, and on which was traced the epitaph of a happiness that was gone, never to come back!

It was about noon when she was thus seated in her chamber on the occasion that we now propose specially to direct the reader's attention thither. She was clad in the very plainest dress that she had brought with her from London at the time of her ill-fated journey: there was nothing coquettish about her now—no studied air of seductiveness in her toilet any more than there was in her looks. She seemed an altered creature,—but one of those beings whom it is necessary for the hand of Providence to drag, for its own wise purposes, through the most terrible ordeals, and whose hearts must pass through fiery furnaces in order that they may be chastened. Books were before her upon the table at which she sat; and they were books which she read *now*—but which only a few months back, when in the luxurious saloons at Madame Angelique's house of gilded infamy, she would have tossed away from her with the light laugh of scorn.

Yes—and bitterly, bitterly did Lettice Rodney repent of her misdeeds. She thought of the Duchess of Marchmont, to accomplish whose ruin she had lent herself; and the conviction was strong in her mind that her own calamity was to a certain extent a judgment upon her head for her wickedness *then*. But she knew that she had many, many other sins to answer for:—for instance, her personation of Mrs. Rayner in order to rob the lawyer of his money: and then too the very object of the journey which she had undertaken at the time—namely, to try and wean away Eveleen O'Brien from that parental home to which the reformed young woman had gone back. For all these misdeeds, either accomplished or meditated—and for the life of voluntary pollution and depravity which she had led—did Lettice Rodney believe herself most righteously punished now.

And yet she was not altogether without the hope that her innocence would yet be made apparent; and entertaining this hope, her present contrition was all the more praiseworthy: for it would indeed have been comparatively little worth if merely the result of that terrorism which belongs to the anticipation of an inevitably ignominious fate. But whence arose that hope? A few words will explain. When Lettice Rodney was beginning to recover from her dangerous illness—when she awoke from that long period of mingled delirium and torpor, to a consciousness of her dread position—she was visited by Mr. Redcliffe. This gentleman questioned her minutely as to the whole incidents of the tragedy at Pollard's house: he likewise gave her certain instructions; and bidding her put faith in Providence, he declared that all that man could do should be done to make her innocence apparent, if innocent she really were. Then, too, did he inform her that he was the individual whom she had encountered on that memorable night by the side of the pond where he had extorted from her a full confession of her misdeeds towards the Duchess of Marchmont; and he likewise gave her to understand that when he visited Madame Angelique's den of infamy, it was in reality from no sensuous inclinations, but because he had special objects to serve. Nor less did he unfold to her that it was through his interposition the penitent Eveleen O'Brien was restored to her home and had received the parental forgiveness. From that visit on the part of Mr. Redcliffe was it that Lettice entertained the hope of her innocence being yet proclaimed to the world.

And now we return to the special occasion on which we have been speaking of her as being seated in her prison-chamber, and devoting her attention to the volumes which the chaplain and the governor had furnished. Presently the door opened; and as Lettice slowly turned her mournful look thither, expecting that it was merely the matron of the infirmary, she beheld Mr. Redcliffe. The door closed behind him; and taking a seat on the opposite side of the table, he bade Lettice resume her own, from which she had risen through respect towards the kind friend whom heaven had sent her. He made inquiries concerning her health: he questioned her as to her present frame of mind; and he found that the soul was in a better condition than the body.

"Even if my innocence be made apparent, Mr. Redcliffe," said the prisoner, in a voice of profound melancholy,—"and even if I go forth from this gaol into the great world again, I shall never recover from the blow which has so cruelly smitten me. But as for my penitence—Oh, believe me to be sincere!—I beseech you to believe that I am truly contrite!"

"Six weeks have elapsed," said Mr. Redcliffe, "since I last beheld you. You had then only just awakened, as it were, from the unconsciousness of alternating fever and torpor; and your mind was under influences but little calculated to render it calm and collected. Do you remember all that you told me then?"

"Every syllable, Mr. Redcliffe!" answered Lettice emphatically.

"And every syllable was consistent with truth?" said the philanthropist inquiringly.

"As I have a soul to be saved!" rejoined Lettice. "I have been very wicked—but never never was I capable of such a crime as that—— no, never! My soul would have abhorred it."

"I believe you," answered Mr. Redcliffe: "for certain little incidents have come to my knowledge which tend more or less to corroborate some portions of your narrative. Describe to me once more, as accurately and minutely as you can, the appearances of the two men whom—as you allege—you saw on that fatal night in company with Mrs. Webber the housekeeper."

Lettice did so; and Mr. Redcliffe murmured to himself in a musing manner, "Yes—they are the very same!"

"Do you—do you think that there is a prospect of my innocence being proved?" asked Lettice with an almost anguished eagerness.

"I hope so," responded Redcliffe: "but I charge you not to indulge too much in a hope which might possibly be disappointed. Heaven is the disposer of all events; and it is only by heaven's sufferance that man can be permitted to work them out to a particular end. I shall tell you nothing of the plans I am adopting on your behalf: suffice it for you to know that I am not idle."

"What can I say, Mr. Redcliffe," asked Lettice, profoundly moved, "to convince you of my gratitude?"

"I am certain that you are grateful," he answered: "but it is not gratitude that I require—it is the assurance that you are truly penitent for those misdeeds that you *have* committed. And in this also I believe you. I learn from the governor sufficient to convince me that you fulfilled the injunctions which I gave you on the occasion of my former visit."

"Oh, not for the world, Mr. Redcliffe, would I have neglected them!" exclaimed Lettice. "That infamous woman Madame Angelique came down from London to see me a few days after you were last here: but I refused to receive her. Then she sent an attorney residing at Liverpool, to offer to conduct my case: but I told the man of business that I was fortunately not without friends—and that even if I were, I would accept nothing at the hands of Madame Angelique."

"These particulars I have learnt from the governor," remarked Mr. Redcliffe: "and I am pleased to find that you have thus fulfilled all my instructions. Your trial will come on shortly: able counsel has been retained for you—and as I have already hinted, I am not idle in other respects. I have entrusted your case to the most eminent solicitor in Liverpool; and this afternoon he will call upon you to ascertain whether he has correctly taken down every detail of the statement which I made him on your behalf. I purpose to remain in this neighbourhood for a few days; and I shall see you again. But ere I leave you on the present occasion, let me repeat my warning,—that you indulge not too far in whatsoever hope I may have held out—but that you fix your thoughts upon that heaven whose forgiveness you so much need!"

Lettice made a suitable answer; and then, as Mr. Redcliffe was about to leave her, she said, "May I hope, sir, that Madame Angelique has not succeeded by other means in enticing away Eveleen from the home to which you restored her?"

"No," answered Mr. Redcliffe: "Eveleen is with her parents. She is fully upon her guard against the machinations of that vile woman; and I have no fear that she will either relapse into error, or become the victim of any new snare."

Mr. Redcliffe then took his departure, accompanied by the heartfelt gratitude of the penitent Lettice Rodney.

While this interview was taking place between the philanthropist and the prisoner, the following conversation was being held in the grounds of a handsome country-seat, about four miles from Liverpool. That country-seat was the abode of Sir William Stanley; and the discourse to which we have just alluded, was progressing between this gentleman and his son. Captain Stanley had only arrived within the same hour at the paternal mansion,—where he was to spend a few weeks, he having obtained leave of absence from his regiment. We have already said he was about twenty-four years of age: we may add that he was a handsome young man—of the middle height—well made—and of genteel figure. He was steady in his conduct—endowed with high notions of honour—of generous disposition—and of considerable intellectual acquirements. He had a good parent: but he himself was a son of whom any father might be proud.

"And who is this Mr. Redcliffe whom you are expecting to-day?" inquired Captain Stanley, as he sauntered with Sir William through the spacious and well laid-out grounds attached to the mansion,—which we may as well observe bore the name of Stanley Hall.

"Do you not remember, my dear Robert, how I was indebted to a gallant Englishman for my life when traversing the Indian jungle——"

"Can I, my dear father, ever forget an occurrence which, when I read it, caused me for the moment as much cruel terror as if I had indeed lost you—but which the next instant was succeeded by as thrilling a joy at the certainty of your escape? You however omitted in your letter to specify the name of the valorous Englishman who rescued you from those bloodthirsty Thugs; and after your return to England you never happened to mention it."

"That gentleman, then," rejoined Sir William, "is the Mr. Redcliffe who will be with us presently."

"And most heartily shall I grasp the hand of my father's deliverer!" exclaimed the Captain. "Sincerely do I hope, too, that he will remain with us some while: for *his* is a friendship which I shall be proud to cultivate."

"You will have the opportunity," replied Sir William Stanley: "for according to the letter which I received from Mr. Redcliffe this morning, he purposes to remain with us a few days; and I know that he will be here again shortly, before your leave of absence expires,—inasmuch as he takes considerable interest in a case which has caused great excitement in our neighbourhood, and which will be brought forward at the approaching assizes——I mean that of the accused young woman, Lettice Rodney."

"Ah! that reminds me, my dear father," exclaimed the Captain, "that when you wrote to me some time ago upon the subject, you hinted that you were not quite so convinced as other persons seemed to be, of the prisoner's guilt."

"Nor am I, Robert," returned the Baronet; "and I will explain to you wherefore. The crime—by whomsoever perpetrated—took place, as you recollect, about three months back; and it was only a few days after the occurrence, that as I was walking in Liverpool I encountered Mr. Redcliffe. I instantaneously recognised the brave man to whom I owed my life: and we got into conversation. He then explained to me what had brought him to Liverpool. He had read in the newspapers the account of the murder, and the remarkable story which the accused Lettice Rodney told in her defence before the borough-magistrates. He had known something of her previously; and though he was acquainted with nothing to her credit—but the very reverse—he nevertheless did not think, from his knowledge of human nature, that she was a young woman of so thoroughly black a heart as to prompt her to the commission of such a frightful deed. Besides—without entering into detailed explanations—he informed me that he had very recently encountered her under circumstances when she was so completely overawed by the idea of being upon a spot which was the scene of a fearful murder perpetrated some years back, that he felt persuaded she had *not* the courage, even if she were sufficiently wicked, to accomplish such a crime. Her tale too—that tale which she related in her defence—had struck him as being too extraordinary to be a mere concoction; and he spoke emphatically of the danger of trusting to circumstantial evidence, as well as of the deplorable errors into which mankind has at different times fallen when rushing precipitately to a belief of a fellow-creature's guilt. Such was the tenour of Mr. Redcliffe's discourse when I encountered him nearly three months back in Liverpool; and he further informed me that he had been to the gaol to see Lettice Rodney—but that she was raving in the delirium of fever and unconscious of everything that was passing around. I invited him to the Hall: he came and passed a few days with me,—during which he instituted secret but minute inquiries into the character of the murdered lawyer's housekeeper, Mrs. Webber."

"And what was the result?" inquired Captain Stanley.

"Nothing of importance," responded the Baronet: "indeed, she appeared to be almost a complete stranger in Liverpool, and had only been a very short time in Mr. Pollard's service before he met his death in so terrible a manner. Mr. Redcliffe besought my good offices as a magistrate on behalf of Lettice Rodney; and ere he took his departure for London, he begged me to write to him so soon as the young woman should be in a condition to receive a visit from him. Six weeks elapsed before I was enabled to make such a communication: but in the meantime I received two or three letters from Mr. Redcliffe, informing me that a few little incidents which had come to his knowledge, seemed to afford something like a corroboration of certain parts of the tale which Lettice Rodney had told in her defence. At the expiration of those six weeks, Mr. Redcliffe returned, in consequence of a communication which he received from me; and he then had an interview with Lettice Rodney in the gaol. The result was to establish the conviction in his mind that she is really innocent. But he prudently abstained from giving her too much hope,—lest after all it should be doomed to disappointment. On that occasion he remained with me a few days; and now he is returning into our neighbourhood to assure himself that the lawyer to whom he has entrusted the case thoroughly understands it."

"All this is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Captain Stanley: "the whole tale is a romance!"

"From the positive manner in which Mr. Redcliffe has written and spoken to me," rejoined Sir William, "I am fully inclined to adopt his opinion. Besides, as a visiting magistrate I have seen this Lettice Rodney—I have conversed with her—I have questioned her upon various features of her tale—and I have found her consistent in all its parts. That she is penitent, too, I am well assured; and most sincerely do I hope that Mr. Redcliffe will succeed in his humane purpose."

"And I entertain a similar hope," cried Captain Stanley, with warmth. "If I can render Mr. Redcliffe the slightest assistance in prosecuting his inquiries or researches, I shall be only too happy."

"He is a strange man, Robert," observed the Baronet; "and chooses to do things in his own way. I heard it mentioned in Calcutta that he had been for many years resident—some said a prisoner—in the capital of Inderabad. It was moreover stated that he was possessed of considerable wealth. That he is the bravest of the brave, I had the best proof when he delivered me from the murderous villains in the jungle: that he is magnanimous and noble-hearted, his conduct in respect to Lettice Rodney fully certifies. It must not however be thought for a single moment that his acquaintance with this young woman originated in anything immoral. Far from it."

"I long to form the friendship of this admirable man," exclaimed the warm-hearted Captain Stanley.

At this moment a post-chaise was seen approaching through the grounds; and as it drew near, the Baronet recognised Mr. Redcliffe as its occupant. He alighted to join the two gentlemen: and the chaise went on to the Hall to deposit his portmanteau. The Baronet grasped his guest warmly by the hand—and then introduced him to his son. Mr. Redcliffe stated that he had just come from seeing Lettice Rodney in the gaol: and he expressed his conviction of her full and complete innocence of the murder, whatever her other misdeeds might have been.

The Baronet, the Captain, and Mr. Redcliffe extended their ramble to where the grounds joined the road leading to Liverpool; and as they were about to turn back again, a strange-looking woman rose up from the other side of the fence,—she having been previously seated there. She was tall and thin; and if her complexion had been swarthy, she might have been taken for one of the gipsy race: but instead of being dark, it had evidently in her more youthful period been fair—and it was now partly sallow and partly sunburnt. Her countenance was exceedingly emaciated and careworn: and a certain wild wandering expression in the eyes showed but too plainly that the unfortunate creature's intellects were unsettled. Her hair—once dark—was streaked with gray: and yet she did not appear to be old:—indeed, if her age were two or three years past forty, it was the very outside. As for her apparel,—it was this that at the first glance gave her a gipsy aspect. It consisted of an old cotton gown, with a dingy cloak over it; and instead of a bonnet or cap, she wore a cotton handkerchief tied round her head. Blue woollen stockings and coarse shoes completed her garb. Her appearance was however cleanly; and notwithstanding the poverty of her attire, there was a certain neatness in it which impressed the beholder with the idea that she had seen better days.

"Ah! poor Crazy Jane," said the Baronet, in a low tone and with a compassionating look, as he beheld the woman stand up from the opposite side of the fence.

"A penny for poor crazy Jane?" she said, thrusting her skinny arm between the palings.

"You know, Jane," said Sir William Stanley, with a benevolent and pitying smile, "that I never give you a penny:"—at the same time he drew forth his purse.

"No, true!" ejaculated the woman. "I remember now! Sir William Stanley is always charitable—and that is the reason I so seldom come near the Hall. I don't like to intrude on good nature. Ah, dear me! I was not always a poor wandering outcast:"—and then drawing back her hand from betwixt the palings, she pressed it to her brow.

"Poor creature!" said the Baronet. "Here are five shillings for you."

She did not however seem to hear him; but with her hand still pressed to her forehead, she muttered incoherently to herself:—then at length speaking in a louder tone, she said, "Ah! I have got something more upon my mind——I wish I could explain it—but I cannot. It is not the same thing that has haunted me so long—no, it is something new: but alas! I cannot—I cannot!" and the poor creature shook her head despondingly, as if she deeply felt her inability to give lucid expression to some idea that was uppermost in her mind.

"Here are the five shillings, Jane," said the Baronet: and he thrust them through the fence.

"Heaven's blessing upon you!" murmured the afflicted woman—and tears trickled down her wasted countenance: then taking the money, she passed abruptly away and was soon out of sight.

"She is as mad as ever, poor creature!" said the Captain. "I remember her from my boyhood."

"Yes—and I remember her for many, many years," added the Baronet. "Sadly is she changed, too, since first I knew her! She was then young and good-looking——"

"And who is this unfortunate woman?" asked Mr. Redcliffe.

"No one appears rightly able to give any explanation on the subject," returned Sir William Stanley. "She wanders about the country in all directions—and has been seen more than a hundred miles from here. Sometimes she disappears altogether for several months, and then suddenly turns up again. There is a half-ruined hut about four miles hence, which she inhabits when in the neighbourhood; and as you may suppose, she lives entirely upon charity. I have often endeavoured to lead her into conversation, and ascertain if possible what she originally was, and what calamity turned her brain: but I have never succeeded in eliciting more than that she had seen better days, and that she had stood in the presence of ladies of the highest rank,—but whether as a companion or a menial, does not very plainly appear—though I should rather suspect in the latter capacity."

The conversation presently turned into some other channel; and the three gentlemen retraced their way to the mansion.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CRAZY JANE.

It was in the forenoon—a couple of days after the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe at Stanley Hall, and while this gentleman himself had gone into Liverpool to see the solicitor employed on behalf of Lettice Rodney—that Captain Stanley was riding out on horseback, followed by one of his father's grooms. Diverging from the road, he took a smart gallop through the fields; and had arrived in the neighbourhood of a copse, which he was about to skirt, when Crazy Jane suddenly sprang up before him as if she were rising out of the earth. The Captain drew in his steed, and spoke to her with compassionating kindness.

"You are Sir William Stanley's son," she said, gazing intently upon him; "and you are a good young man—you have all your father's benevolence. No—no, do not put your hand into your pocket—I want not money now. Your father gave me enough to keep me for——I know not how long. Ah, I had something to say the moment I caught sight of you—I determined to say it—and now it is all slipping out of my head!"

At first her utterance was rapid, accentuated, and jerking: but these last words were spoken with a profound mournfulness; and pressing her hand to her forehead, she evidently strove to steady her ideas.

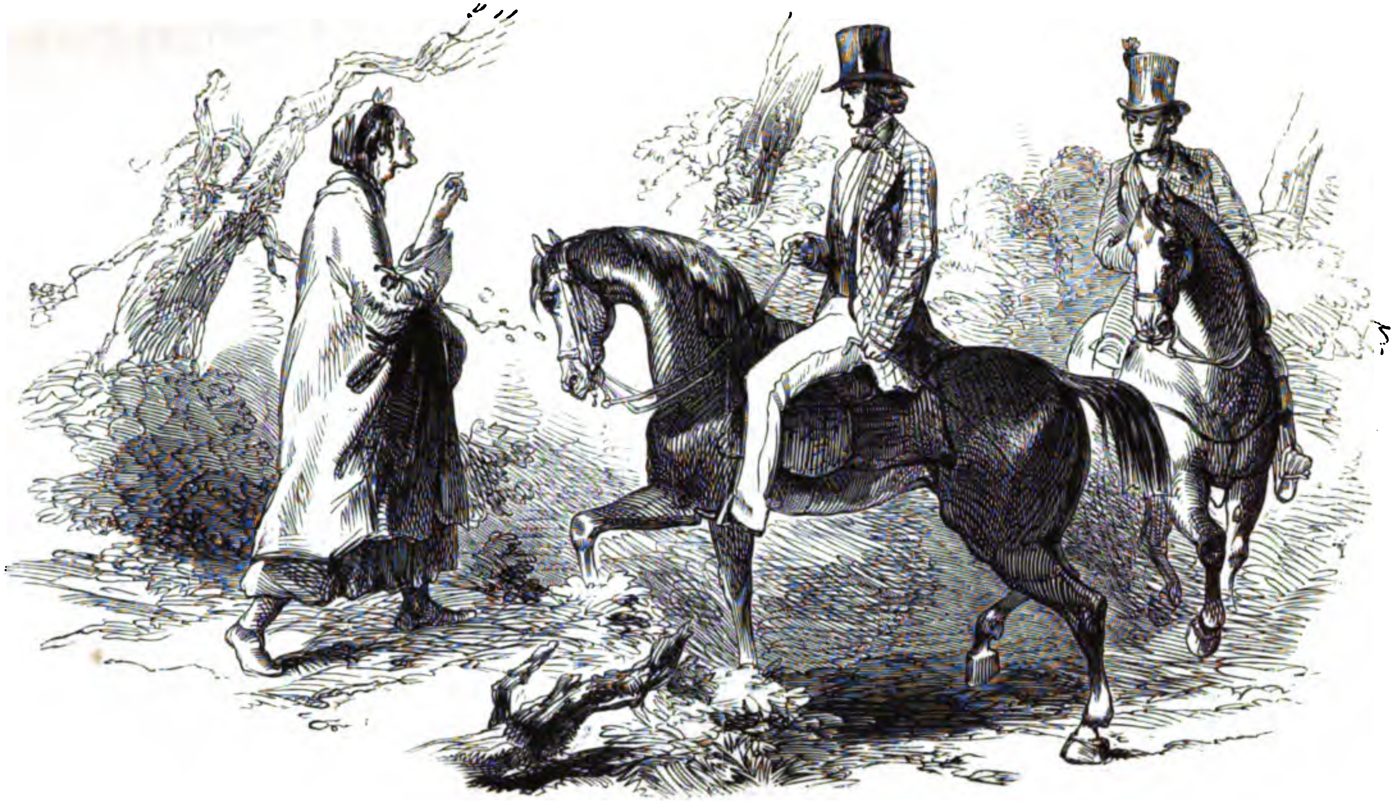
"What is it, Jane?" asked the young gentleman, in a kind tone. "Think—reflect—take your time: I am in no hurry if you really wish to speak to me."

"I do, I do!" ejaculated the mad woman. "It is something I have got *here*:"—and she touched her forehead. "No—it is *here!*" she added after a pause, and she laid her hand upon her heart. "It is something that oppresses me—something that lies as heavy as lead on my bosom, and prevents me from sleeping at night. I wish I could tell it—I thought I could just now—I said it all over to myself, just as I used to say my prayers when I was a child: but it has all gone out of my head!"

"What can it be?" asked Captain Stanley, much interested in the woman's words and manner: for he felt convinced that it was not a mere meaningless phase of her madness, but that it was this very madness itself which prevented her from giving lucid expression to something that she had really to reveal.

"What is it, you ask?" she said, with a sudden brightening up of her hitherto vacant desponding look. "Ah! now there is a gleam shooting into my mind——yes, yes, it is about that dreadful murder——"

"The murder?" ejaculated Stanley, all the in-



terest he had previously felt being immensely enhanced in a moment.

"Ah, it is all gone out of my memory again!" she said, shaking her head dolefully: "you made me start—you drove it away! It is of no use:"—and with these words she plunged abruptly into the copse, thus disappearing from the view of the amazed Captain and his equally astonished groom.

"There is something extraordinary in this," said Stanley to the domestic: "that woman evidently knows something—but the impression of it is upon her mind like that of an unusual object upon the mind of a child—too dim and uncertain to be properly explained. We will return at once to the Hall and tell my father what has taken place. Mr. Redcliffe, too, said he should be back by luncheon-time; and this is intelligence which he will be deeply interested to receive."

Captain Stanley accordingly took the nearest route to the Hall, which he reached just as Mr. Redcliffe was alighting from the Baronet's carriage, which had taken him into Liverpool. Sir William Stanley, his son, and their guest were speedily closeted together; and the interview between the young gentleman and Crazy Jane was the subject of deliberation.

"This is indeed most important," observed Mr. Redcliffe: "for it is evidently the same subject to which the woman alluded when we met her at the fence, and when she said that she had *something new* upon her mind."

"Let us go and see her," exclaimed the Baronet, "without delay. But no!—Redcliffe, you shall go alone—I have more faith in your power to lead her into lucid conversation than in my own. I have already so often failed. Besides, it is frequently to a stranger that these poor demented creatures will prove more rational than to those whom they have known for a long time, and who have always been accustomed to talk to them in a particular way."

"Yes," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I will lose no time in seeing her. I think you stated that her hut is about four miles distant? If you indicate the particular direction, I will set out and walk thither."

"Take the carriage—or go on horseback," exclaimed the Baronet.

"No," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: "I will walk—because in that case I may stand a better chance of falling in with her if she be rambling about. And I will go alone too, as she may be the less embarrassed and bewildered in conversing with one than in talking in the presence of two or more."

Sir William Stanley gave Mr. Redcliffe sufficient explanations to guide him towards Crazy Jane's hut; and that gentleman accordingly set out. He had proceeded for a distance of about three miles across the fields, when on emerging into a lane bordered by high thick hedges, he perceived Crazy Jane sitting on the green bank under one of these hedges, rocking herself to and fro and speaking aloud. An idea suddenly entered Mr. Redcliffe's mind. He remembered that Captain Stanley had stated how Crazy Jane had spoken of having "said it all to herself," and how by an incautious ejaculation he had driven the poor woman's thoughts out of her head; and it therefore occurred to Mr. Redcliffe that when she was alone she was better able to keep her ideas collected. She had not as yet seen him as he emerged into the lane: he got at the back of the hedge—and stealthily creeping along, halted close behind the spot where Crazy Jane was still seated. She was continuing to muse in an audible tone, but in strangely disjointed and broken sentences,—the tenour of which was however as follows:—

"It must be many and many a year since *then*——but I cannot recollect how many! I was very different at that time——Ah, so different! People did not call me Crazy Jane. No, it was 'Jane my good girl, do this or do that.'—Ah, that was the way my poor dear mistress used to speak! Oh, how I loved her! Alas, alas, that it should have all ended as it did——shocking! shocking! I know not why I should always and always be thinking of it. And yet I can't help it. Till that *other thing* came into my mind, I never could think of anything else. How piteously she wept!—it really seems as if I saw her now standing before me. Yes, when the mist is deepest around me, I see that *one* image as plain as ever. She was not guilty——no, no, she was not! I am sure she was not! She was too good—too kind for *that*. Oh, what became of you, my dear, dear mistress?"

Crazy Jane ceased: but her sobs were audible to Mr. Redcliffe as he listened behind the hedge.

"Who was more beautiful," at length continued the mad woman in her audible musings, "than the Duchess of Marchmont? They should have married her to Bertram Vivian—and not to his uncle. Alas, alas! to have thrown that divine creature away upon that old man——it was shocking! shocking! Often and often have I thought of going to Oaklands to see the old place; and I have dragged myself for miles and miles——I wonder how many——along the roads and through the fields, until I had not the courage to go further—and then I have come back to my hut. No, no—I could not look again upon that house where I last saw the good Duchess Eliza. I could not tread those gravel-walks where I once saw her move in all the glory of her beauty! Oh, it was a dreadful day! But those tears which she shed *then* seem to fall upon my heart even *now* like scalding drops. My poor dear mistress, I could have laid down my life for you!"

Here there was another pause in the poor mad woman's musings; and again did her convulsive sobs reach the ears of Clement Redcliffe.

"What darkness and confusion have been in my brain ever since!" she once more mused audibly. "And yet there are times that I see it all before me, so plain—so plain—that I think it is taking place all over and over anew! But this *other thing* that is now in my mind——Let me reflect! When did it happen? Oh, poor creature that I am—I cannot remember anything about dates; and yet I am sure it was not near so far back as those dreadful scenes at Oaklands——no, not near so far back! I was a young woman; and they used to say I was pretty at the time the dear Duchess and Bertram Vivian——But what *could* have become of them both?" she ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting herself: "what *could* have become of them? I wander again!—there is that other thing I wish to get back to my mind. Let me see? If I steady my head on both my hands, I can always reflect with more clearness: I will shut my eyes, so as to see nothing to take off my attention. There—like that!"

Now the woman ceased speaking; and Redcliffe anxiously waited to hear what next might issue from her lips. But five minutes passed—and she said nothing: ten minutes—and still she continued silent. He held his breath suspended—he was motionless behind the hedge; he was so completely on his guard as not so much as to rustle a leaf for fear of interrupting her in the current of her thoughts.

"There now!" she abruptly exclaimed: "I have got the whole of it as completely in my head as if this was the night when it happened, and as if I had not thought of anything since. Ah! if any one to whom I chose to reveal it should pass by at this moment!"

Redcliffe glided noiselessly along the back of the hedge—reached the gate by which he had entered the field—and passing through it, once more emerged into the lane. Crazy Jane immediately recognised him as the gentleman whom she had seen two or three days back in company with Sir William and Captain Stanley; and by a certain association of ideas, she conceived that any friend of theirs must be a fit and proper person to receive the communications which she had to make. For the woman's intellects were not so completely disordered as to prevent her from having at times a certain amount of the reasoning faculty left: and moreover, as is the case with nearly all persons whose minds are unsettled, there were particular circumstances which would lead her ideas into a connected flow and in continuous channels. This was the case now; and for nearly half-an-hour did Redcliffe remain in discourse with Crazy Jane. He was careful how he dealt with her: he humoured her—he did not interrupt her quickly nor suddenly—he exhibited all possible patience, suffering the woman to tell her tale in her own way;—and thus from her jerking, disjointed sentences, he managed to elicit a narrative which in itself was complete as well as consistent in all its parts. What this was, we need not at present explain to the reader: suffice it to say that having obtained from the woman all he could elicit, he gave her some money and returned to Stanley Hall.

After a long conference with Sir William and Captain Stanley, it was decided that an attempt should be made to induce Crazy Jane to take up her abode at the Hall,—where it was proposed to place her under the care of the housekeeper, who was a kind-hearted and intelligent woman. We need not unnecessarily extend the details of our narrative by describing how this aim was accomplished: it is sufficient for our purpose to state that it was successfully carried out; and when the poor woman found herself apparelled in decent attire, seated in a comfortable room, supplied with good wholesome food, and treated with the most compassionating kindness, she so fully comprehended the change in her condition that she was melted to tears.

Mr. Redcliffe hastened up to London, to ascertain the progress of those measures which he had some months previously set a-foot on Lettice Rodney's behalf, and to which he had distantly alluded in his conversation with her: but on this head it is likewise unnecessary for us to enter into particulars at the present moment, inasmuch as the whole will shortly transpire.

At the expiration of another week the trial of Lettice Rodney commenced at Liverpool. The court, opening with the usual solemnities, was crowded to excess: for all the excitement which the murder had created at the time, was now revived. It had been rumoured too—as we have already said—that Lettice Rodney was not altogether without friends; and that there were certain quarters in which a belief of her innocence existed. Able counsel were engaged to prosecute—able counsel likewise appeared for the defence; and the countenances of the jury showed that they were fully aware of the deep and awful responsibility which attached itself to the duty they had to perform.

The entrance of Lettice Rodney into the court produced a strong impression upon all present. She was dressed in her plainest apparel: the bloom of her beauty was gone—but of that loveliness a sufficiency remained to show what it must have been before anguish and illness had worked such ravages upon her. Her demeanour was in one sense timid and retiring;—yet blended therewith was the look which conscious innocence can alone assume, but which superficial or worldly-minded observers nevertheless too often fancy to be the evidence of a guilt that seeks to shield itself under a bold effrontery.

The case for the prosecution commenced; and the counsel on that side detailed in his opening speech all those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. He stated how Lettice Rodney, assuming the name of Louisa Rayner, and personating that lady, had introduced herself to Mr. Pollard for the purpose of receiving the sum of three thousand pounds which that gentleman was prepared to pay to his ward. The counsel dwelt strongly upon the circumstance of the prisoner having self-appropriated the writing-desk containing the papers which were requisite accessories to the carrying-out of the fraud; and he more than inferred that a young woman who would go to such lengths for so vilely dishonest a purpose,—could not, to say the least of it, be surprised if she found herself in her present position, accused of a crime which somebody must have perpetrated, and of which all the evidence pointed to herself as the authoress. He then detailed the particulars of the murder, according to the deposition which Mrs. Webber had made before the police-magistrate, and which she had subsequently repeated before the coroner. The learned counsel added that Mrs. Webber herself would be almost immediately placed in the witness-box, to reiterate her testimony; and then he proceeded to observe that rumours had been floating abroad within the last few days to the effect that the case for the defence of the prisoner would be far stronger than the public had hitherto expected—but he said, that for his own part he was at a loss to know what this defence could be, unless it were to revive the story which the prisoner had told before the magistrate—a story which must indeed strike every rational person as a most ingenious concoction. But if this story were brought forward, it would be nothing more nor less than an endeavour to turn the tables against the principal witness for the prosecution; and unless there was something more substantial than the uncorroborated assertion of the prisoner in respect to Mrs. Webber and the two ill-looking men whom the prisoner's imagination had conjured up to serve her own purpose and exculpate herself,—he (the learned counsel) hoped for the honour of the English bar that no member thereof would found a defence upon unsupported recrimination and unjustifiable calumny. But if, on the other hand, the defence—as he (the prosecuting counsel) hoped and expected—was to be conducted fairly, honestly, and frankly,—he repeated his former assertion that he could not for the life of him surmise of what nature it could be. He was indeed utterly at a loss to conjecture how any evidence could be brought forward in antagonism with the testimony to be adduced for the prosecution: but he had all possible faith in the wisdom of the jury in arriving at a correct verdict in the end.

The learned counsel sat down; and the crowded auditory felt that the mass of evidence, circumstantial and direct, did indeed press with such fearful weight against the accused, that not even by the wildest conjecture could it be surmised how such a case was to be met. For every one of course felt that if the story which Lettice Rodney had told before the borough-magistrate was now to be repeated, it would require some very powerful evidence to outweigh that on the other side. Nor less was it comprehended that if this story should be proved true, it would have the effect of turning the whole weight of the dreadful accusation against Mrs. Webber, who was now summoned as the principal witness to prove Lettice Rodney's guilt.

Mrs. Webber entered the witness-box amidst a profound silence which prevailed in the court. It has already been observed that there was something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in this woman's looks; and now that she endeavoured to assume the air of one who had nothing upon her own conscience, but was intent only on serving the cause of truth and justice, there was in reality that hardihood about herself which many persons among the auditory had previously supposed to characterise Lettice Rodney. And Lettice Rodney was seen to shudder as that woman, whom for upwards of six months she had not seen, entered the witness-box: but on the other hand, Mrs. Webber flung a look of loathing and abhorrence upon Lettice—a look in which all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation were concentrated. The result of these conflicting demonstrations on the part of prisoner and witness was to cause the utmost suspense and uncertainty still to prevail on the part of the audience.

Mrs. Webber, in response to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, repeated the testimony she had already given before the committing magistrate and at the coroner's inquest. The barrister farther questioned her as to her own respectability,—on which point she stated that she had for many years been in the service of good families, but that for some time previous to the murder she had resided with her daughter in London, and with her son-in-law, who was a gold-beater in good circumstances; that she possessed some little means of her own—but that not being altogether comfortable and happy beneath her son-in-law's roof, she had resolved to go out into service again, as a housekeeper: that her son-in-law, Mr. Smedley, having come down to Liverpool on business, had accidentally heard that there was such a place vacant at Mr. Pollard's; that she had accordingly applied for it, and on producing testimonials, had received it.

Now commenced the cross-examination of Mrs. Webber; and this we must give somewhat in detail.

"Will you state who were the ladies of rank with whom you formerly lived," inquired Lettice Rodney's counsel, "and who gave you the testimonials which you exhibited to Mr. Pollard?"

Mrs. Webber, being prepared for this question, had her answer ready; and she accordingly named two or three ladies of whose deaths she had made herself aware. On this response being returned, Captain Stanley, who was present in the court, quitted it for a few minutes—but not in a way to attract any particular attention.

"Where are those testimonials?" asked the barrister: "and will you have any objection to produce them in court?"

"Not supposing that they would be required," answered the woman, "I left them behind me in London."

"And when did you come from London to attend this trial?" asked the barrister.

"The day before yesterday," was Mrs. Webber's response.

"Did you come alone? Answer me that question."

"There was a person in the same carriage with me, certainly."

"And, on your oath, are you ignorant who that person was?"

"No—I knew him to be a detective officer."

"You had, then, seen him before?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Webber—and for a moment she looked confused: but quickly recovering her self-possession, she prepared to answer the next query.

"Be so kind as to tell the jury under what circumstances you had seen that detective before."

"A few days back," answered Mrs. Webber, "I was going on a little journey——"

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed the cross-examining counsel. "Immediately after the inquest at Liverpool, you returned to London, I believe—where you again took up your abode with your son-in-law John Smedley?"

"Yes: but I had promised the authorities here to come forward when wanted, and give the requisite evidence——"

"Exactly so. You promised—but did you mean to perform? However," exclaimed the barrister, without awaiting an answer, "continue your statement to the jury in respect to the little journey you thought of undertaking a few days back. I believe that for this *little* journey your boxes were all packed, and a hackney-coach was at the door, when something happened? What was that something?"

"A person accosted me as I was stepping into the hackney-coach, and announced himself as a detective officer. He charged me with an intention to go abroad: but I denied it, as it was altogether untrue. Then he told me that if I went anywhere—no matter how short or how long the distance—he should follow me; and that if I attempted to leave England, he should take me into custody."

"To be sure!" said the barrister, with a glance at the jury: "he would have taken you into custody as a witness flying from her recognizances. And what else did he tell you?—what warning did he give you?"

"That there was a watch set upon my movements, and that it would be totally useless for me to think of getting out of the country. But I told him all along that I had no such intention—nor had I: and I think it is very unfair——"

"Never mind what you think," interrupted the cross-examining counsel: "it is for the jury to think in the present case. The detective officer who accompanied you in the train, was the same who intercepted your departure from London and gave you the warnings of which you have spoken?"

"The same," answered Mrs. Webber: and her look was as much as to imply that it was all very easy for the barrister thus to cross-examine her, but that he could not shake her main testimony against the prisoner.

"How long were you in Mr. Pollard's service previous to the commission of the murder?"

"Three weeks," was the answer.

"And having been absent from your brother-in-law's house barely a month, you returned thither notwithstanding the discomfort and unhappiness which had induced you to quit it?"

"Because my daughter naturally supposed I must be very much flurried and excited after the dreadful occurrence in Liverpool; and she wrote to me to come home at once, giving me the assurance that my son-in-law would change his demeanour towards me."

And during these six months that you have been again living in London, what sort of visitors have you occasionally received?"

"What sort of visitors?" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, as if with a surprised and indignant air: but it was merely to shuffle with the question, which indeed had considerably alarmed her.

"Well, I need not press this point at present," said the cross-examining counsel; "and you may stand down."

A witness from London was now examined by the counsel for the prosecution, to prove that Lettice Rodney had been a gay lady: but the name of Madame Angelique's establishment did not transpire. Then followed the testimony of three or four of the first persons who had rushed into Mr. Pollard's house when Mrs. Webber had opened the front-door and had alarmed the neighbourhood with her cries. It was proved that the prisoner was dressed as if to go out—but that she was in a state of unconsciousness when these witnesses appeared upon the scene. In cross-examination they admitted that when Lettice came back to her senses, she seemed horrified or frenzied at being accused of murder, and that she at once hurled the charge at Mrs. Webber and spoke of two villains who were with her. The police-constables who had taken her into custody, were next examined for the prosecution; and they deposed to the finding of Mr. Pollard's purse, containing fifty pounds, upon Lettice Rodney's person. Mrs. Rayner's documents were likewise produced; and evidence was given to show that in addition to the writing-desk which had contained these papers, several articles of Mrs. Rayner's wearing apparel were discovered in Lettice Rodney's box: for the newspaper-accounts of the murder had given publicity to the fact that Mrs. Rayner was the previously unidentified victim of the railway accident, and thus her friends had come forward on learning her sad fate.

The case for the prosecution was closed; and Lettice Rodney's counsel was expected to rise to make a speech in her defence. He did rise—and profound was the suspense which prevailed in the court. The silence was breathless: but when it was broken by the counsel for the defence, there was a sensation of disappointment on his at once declaring that instead of making a speech he should proceed without delay to summon witnesses.

The first witness whom he thus called, was a middle-aged man, plainly attired, of sharp features and with a shrewd look. Mrs. Webber, who had been ordered to remain in the court, winced somewhat when she perceived this individual, whom she evidently recognised. Having been sworn, and having given his name, he stated that he was a detective attached to the metropolitan police. He then deposed to the following effect:—

"A very short time after the murder of Mr. Pollard in this town, I received particular instructions from a gentleman in London. Those instructions were to the effect that I should make all possible inquiries into the character of Mrs. Webber, and that I should watch all her movements. I at once came down to Liverpool, and learnt that immediately after the inquest she had returned to her friends in London. I had no difficulty in finding out who these friends were,—her daughter and son-in-law, bearing the name of Smedley. The Smedleys occupy a house of a somewhat respectable appearance, but situated in a low neighbourhood. They used to let lodgings, but have recently given up that avocation. Smedley himself carries on the business of a gold-beater. He seems however to have little work to do; for he is constantly sauntering about—sometimes in idleness, and at other times in distributing religious tracts. I hired a room in a house nearly fronting the Smedleys; and, aided by another detective, I watched them day and night. One evening, about a week after Mrs. Webber's return, a fellow of desperate character, well known to the police, and bearing the name of Barney the Burker, stealthily entered an alley communicating with the back part of the Smedleys' premises: but I cannot take it upon myself to say that he actually entered those premises. If I had followed to ascertain, I should have excited the suspicion that I was watching the house—and this was to be most carefully avoided, at least at the outset. A few nights afterwards, a lad of about nineteen, whose name is Bill Scott, and who is believed to be an agent of the Burker, paid a similarly stealthy visit to the alley of which I have spoken: but for the same reason as in the other case, I could not ascertain whether he entered the Smedleys' premises. A month passed, and they came not near the house again: but one night I followed Mrs. Webber at a distance, and I tracked her to the Burker's lodging in one of the lowest neighbourhoods of London.

Some weeks later I again saw the Burker pay a visit to the narrow alley; and an hour elapsed before he came out again. Subsequently Bill Scott repeated the visit three or four times; and I have not the slightest doubt that these visits had reference to Mrs. Webber. I learnt in the neighbourhood that she had lived for some years with her son-in-law and daughter; but so far from her having ever been on bad terms with them, or being rendered uncomfortable by Mr. Smedley, the contrary was supposed to be the case. A few days ago Barney the Burker paid another visit to the alley; and on this occasion he remained at least two hours. Early on the following morning a hackney-coach was fetched by Smedley—a number of boxes were brought out—and Mrs. Webber was just on the point of stepping into the vehicle, when I thought it at length time to interfere, in pursuance of a certain portion of my instructions from the gentleman employing me. I accordingly hastened to the spot, and asked Mrs. Webber where she was going. She looked confused and frightened; but almost immediately recovered herself, saying that she was only bent upon a little excursion for change of air. I glanced at the boxes, and saw that they were labelled, '*Mrs. Smith, passenger, Dover.*' I asked her why she took a false name? She gave some evasive reply; but again recovering her effrontery, demanded who I was. I told her that I was a detective officer, and gave her to understand that my mission was merely to prevent her from running away from her recognisances, and to enforce her attendance at this trial. She did not choose to pursue her journey after receiving this intelligence; because I further stated that if on arriving at Dover by the railway, she attempted to embark on board a vessel, I should at once take her into custody. She remained at home for the few days which intervened until it was necessary for her to set off to come to Liverpool. Myself and the other detective continued to watch the house unceasingly after the affair of that intended journey; and in order that Mrs. Webber might not give me the slip between London and Liverpool, I took my place in the same carriage with herself."

The detective, whose evidence had produced a considerable sensation in court, was now cross-examined by the counsel for the prosecution; and the following string of answers will show the nature of the questions put:—

"I have been watching Mrs. Webber for six months. I decline to say what is the name of the gentleman who employed me: but this I will of my own accord declare—that my conviction is he never was the protector of the prisoner, nor was improperly familiar with her, but merely took up her case from motives of humanity. It is true that he has paid all my expenses and has rewarded me liberally. It is no unusual thing for the detectives to be employed by private individuals; nor is it unusual for them to be thus occupied so long a time. I know nothing, and did not mean to infer anything, against the character of the Smedleys. It is perfectly true that they pass in their own neighbourhood as respectable people, and that Smedley is an active member of a religious congregation. It is likewise true that Mrs. Webber is considered in the same neighbourhood a respectable woman."

Here ended the cross-examination on the part of the prosecuting counsel: and the barrister for Lettice Rodney's defence said to the detective, "You must now go out of court and out of hearing: but I shall require your attendance again presently."

The officer accordingly issued from the tribunal; and the counsel for the defence then addressed the judge in the following manner:—

"My lord, I am about to make an application of a somewhat extraordinary character. There is a witness whose evidence is of vital importance to the present case; but it is impossible she can give that testimony personally and orally before this solemn tribunal. Indeed, I will at once admit that her intellects are in so weak a state that she would become bewildered and would inevitably break down. But she has been examined by two justices-of-the-peace: namely, Sir William Stanley and Mr. Simon Ellis—both gentlemen of the highest respectability; and this examination took place in the presence of two physicians well known for their skill and experience with respect to the insane and in all psychological matters. The woman's deposition has been committed to paper: it is accompanied by attesting affidavits on the part of the two justices who received her evidence; and there are likewise affidavits from the medical gentlemen, to the effect that the woman's testimony is held by them to be perfectly credible. I now request permission to introduce that deposition as evidence. Its value can be tested by unmistakable means. If it should be found to constitute an indisputable link in the general chain of evidence, it stamps itself with truth: but if, on the other hand, it should be found irrelevant and unsupported by collateral facts, it can easily be discarded; and your lordship will direct the jury, as well as their own discrimination will tell them, whether or not they are to attach any importance thereto."

The counsel for the prosecution objected to the production of such evidence; and the judge himself appeared to consider it inadmissible: but the foreman of the jury expressed a hope that in a matter where a fellow-creature's life was concerned, no objection would be raised against the production of the evidence alluded to. The judge accordingly ruled in favour of its production; and the reader may conceive how breathless was the suspense which prevailed in the court—how deep was the anxiety of Lettice Rodney, who had remained in perfect ignorance of the nature of the defence to be set up on her behalf—and how serious were growing the guilty Mrs. Webber's apprehensions.

The counsel for the defence unfolded a document which lay before him, and then spoke as follows:—

"This deposition is to the effect that the female who made it, was in the town of Liverpool on the same night that the murder was committed. She was wandering about, when her wayward steps led her up a narrow lane into which open the yard-gates belonging to that row of houses where Mr. Pollard dwelt. She heard one of these gates open and shut; and with some feeling of curiosity which she cannot define, she remained at that gate. Voices were speaking immediately inside: they were conversing in an under-tone—but she listened, and overheard every syllable that was spoken. One voice was that of a man—the other that of a woman. The woman said she had just discovered that there was a mint of money in the iron safe: the man said he supposed therefore the job was for that night. The woman assented, and spoke of having waited for positive information whether Mr. Pollard had got the money in the house to pay to Mrs. Rayner. After some little more conversation, the witness overheard the man say something about the means that had been adopted to get the woman into her position as Pollard's housekeeper; but all that was said upon this point is not clearly remembered by the witness. The woman addressed the man as Barney; and the name of Bill Scott was two or three times mentioned. The witness tarried at the gate until it suddenly opened—and then she hurried away. But hearing the man follow her, she was apprehensive of mischief: she accordingly crouched down under the wall—he passed close by her side, but happened not to come in contact with her; and as the lane was involved in total darkness, he beheld her not. Such, my lord and gentlemen," concluded the counsel for the defence, "is the deposition of the witness who for the reasons stated cannot appear in your presence: and those same reasons will account for the fact of her having abstained from declaring to the authorities all she knew, until a few chance words which she the other day let drop, caused an inquiry to be made, and led to the sifting of the matter."

It would be impossible to describe the sensation which prevailed in the court during and after the reading of this deposition. Lettice Rodney clasped her hands together—the tears ran down her cheeks—she was well nigh overpowered by her emotions. Mrs. Webber grew pale as death; and her troubled looks were flung nervously around, to ascertain the impression made by this document. The counsel for the prosecution was astonished—a feeling in which the judge and jury evidently participated; and the spectators showed by their countenances that their opinions were undergoing a rapid change, turning in Lettice Rodney's favour and therefore against Mrs. Webber.

"I will now read from my instructions," said the counsel for the defence, "the description which the prisoner has given her legal adviser of the two ill-looking persons whom she alleges to have seen with Mr. Pollard's housekeeper on the memorable night of the foul tragedy which has led to this judicial inquiry."

The barrister accordingly read the personal descriptions of the Burker and of Bill Scott; and when he had finished, he said, "At this stage of the proceedings I will call back the witness whom I just now sent out of court—I mean the detective officer."

This witness was accordingly re-summoned; and on again making his appearance, he was desired by the counsel for the defence to describe the persons of Barney the Burker and of Bill Scott—the two individuals whom he had seen on several occasions enter the alley communicating with the Smedleys' abode. That description tallied to a nicety with the one given by Lettice Rodney, and ere now read from the barrister's instructions.

But there was still another witness forthcoming for the defence; and this was the landlord of the low public-house, or boozing-ken, at which Barney and Bill Scott had lodged when they were at Liverpool. The public-house itself was in the close vicinage of the late Mr. Pollard's abode; and the landlord proved that the time when the Burker and his acolyte lodged beneath his roof, was precisely that when the murder was committed. He even recollected that they were out late on the particular night itself, and that they took their departure at a very early hour in the morning: but he had not then the faintest idea that they were the authors of the crime, inasmuch as it appeared to be so completely brought home to Lettice Rodney.

Scarcely was the landlord's evidence given, when a person entered the court and handed a paper to the counsel for the defence. It was now six o'clock in the evening—the trial had lasted the whole day—and several hours had elapsed since Mrs. Webber first appeared in the witness-box.

"I have yet something to submit to the Court," said the counsel for the defence. "The detective officer who is in attendance here, instructed his brother-detective who was engaged with him in the metropolis in the same case, to be at the London terminus of the railway this day, so that he might be in readiness to act according to any instructions telegraphed up to him. At the outset of her evidence in the morning, the woman Webber stated that she had some time back been in the service of certain deceased ladies, whom she named. Upon this answer being given, a gentleman in court—who from humane motives is interested in the case—sped to the electric telegraph office, and sent up certain instructions to the detective in London. These were promptly acted upon: the results of certain inquiries have been telegraphed down to Liverpool; and the paper containing them, has just been placed in my hand. Though the ladies whom the woman Webber named, have ceased to exist, yet their families still live, and still occupy the same dwellings. The answers they gave to the queries put to them by the detective officer in London, furnish a complete refutation to the woman Webber's statements in respect to her ever having occupied situations in the service of the deceased ladies."

The counsel for the defence handed the telegraphic despatch to some one near, that it might be passed to the clerk of the court; and when it had been read, the barrister observed, "My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, without another syllable *that* is my case!"

All eyes were now turned upon the counsel for the prosecution; and this gentleman, rising from his seat, simply remarked that he had done his duty in placing the charge before the court in the first instance according to the instructions he had received—but he significantly added that after the turn which matters had taken, he should not for a moment think of exercising his right to reply to the case for the defence. This announcement was received with a certain sensation indicative of applause, which the ushers of the court did not attempt to suppress: for they themselves doubtless had their feelings enlisted in the same startling drama which thus for so many hours had been commanding so vivid an interest. The judge said but a few words in charge to the jury,—merely remarking that he believed their course to be plain and simple enough. They were of the same opinion: for after only five minutes' consultation, and without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of "Not Guilty."

Although this decision was expected by Lettice Rodney, yet the instant it was delivered she was so overwhelmed by her feelings that she sank down in a swoon, and was thus borne out of court. At the same time Mrs. Webber was given into custody, charged with the crime for which Lettice Rodney had been tried: but it was understood that the infamous woman should not be placed upon her own trial until the Autumn Assizes. The reason was not specified in court: but every one comprehended that the delay was agreed upon in order that time might be allowed for the capture of her two accomplices, Barney the Burker and Bill Scott.

Before concluding this chapter, we may as well observe that Mr. Redcliffe was the unnamed gentleman who had employed the detectives to watch the proceedings and movements of Mrs. Webber. It was in consequence of the information from time to time received from those officers, about the visits of Barney and Bill Scott to the alley communicating with the Smedleys' house, that he had dropped certain hints to Sir William Stanley, both in his letters and his conversation, relative to circumstances corroborative of Lettice Rodney's innocence. It will be likewise understood wherefore in that interview with Lettice which we have described, Mr. Redcliffe questioned her so particularly with regard to the two ill-looking men whom she had spoken of as Mrs. Webber's accomplices. We may likewise add that when Captain Stanley left the court at the ealiest stage of Mrs. Webber's examination, it was for the purpose of transmittiug to the metropolis the telegraphic message which brought back the information of that woman's mendacity in respect to the former situations she had filled.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

LOW LIFE IN LONDON.

It will be remembered that Captain Stanley had expressed to his uncle Sir William, his desire to be of service to Mr. Redcliffe in those proceedings which the latter gentleman had so secretly but so judiciously carried on. The Captain's offer had been duly mentioned to Mr. Redcliffe; and it was in pursuance of a hint received from the generous philanthropist that Captain Stanley set off to London by the first train which started after the trial.

Mr. Redcliffe purposed to remain a few days longer with his friend Sir William Stanley, in order that he might adopt some measures for the future welfare of Lettice Rodney, and to place her in a position which would save her from the chance of being driven by poverty back again into the way of life which she had been leading at Madame Angelique's. As Mr. Redcliffe therefore could not immediately return to the metropolis, he had hurried off Captain Stanley in the manner described, in order that this gentleman might assist the detectives, and co-operate with them to the best of his ability, in ferreting out the Burker and Bill Scott.

Captain Stanley reached London early in the morning; and after a few hours' rest, he proceeded in the forenoon to call upon the lieutenant-colonel of his regiment, who was likewise then in the metropolis. This was none other than Lord Charles Meredith, the brother of Octavian. He was residing with his father the Marquis of Penshurst; and though he had reached so high a rank in the army, he was but twenty-seven years of age. Captain Stanley received a kind welcome from his superior officer, with whom indeed he was on most intimate terms; and he explained the business that had brought him to London.

"But do you not think, my dear fellow," inquired Lord Charles, "that the detectives are a thousand times more likely to discover these miscreants than you are?"

"I am not so sure of that," responded Stanley. "These villains will be so completely on their guard that they may manage to elude the detectives for a long time to come."

"Then doubtless you have some plan in view?" said Lord Charles Meredith.

"I purpose to throw myself, as it were, every night into the lowest neighbourhoods, and to penetrate into the vilest dens, as if merely impelled by curiosity, or else under the pretence of discovering some one whose fictitious description I shall render as different as possible from that of either of the real objects of my search. By these means I may possibly light upon them; and if not, there will be no harm done."

"But you have never seen either of these ruffians?" said Lord Charles.

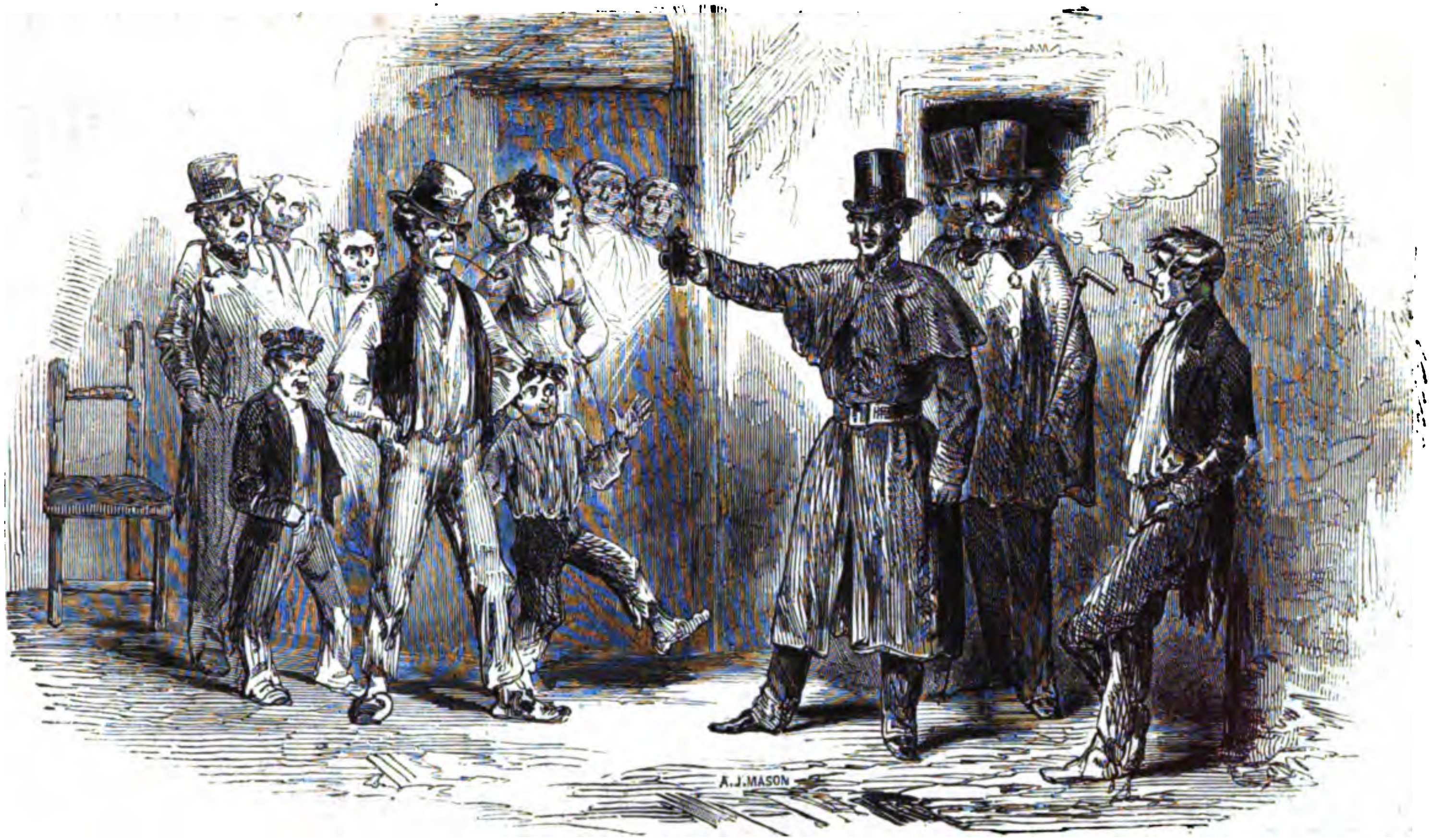
"No—it is true," rejoined Captain Stanley: "but I have received from the detective so minute and accurate a description of them, that I am convinced I should recognise them in a moment."

"I have a very great mind to bear you company in your search—or at least for the coming night," said Lord Charles Meredith. "I have heard and read much of these loathsome neighbourhoods and hideous dens where poverty and crime herd together—and I should like to see them."

"It was in the hope you would be my companion, that I have sought you now," replied Captain Stanley.

The two officers then settled their arrangements: it was agreed that they should dine together in the evening, and afterwards set out upon their excursion.

A little after ten o'clock they might have been seen wending their way towards Westminster Bridge together. Although it was the middle of summer, the night was cold and inclement: a drizzling rain made the shop lights and the street lamps appear as if they were seen through a mist. The daughters of crime were standing under doorways, or huddling together at the entrances of courts; while the ragged and half-starved children of poverty were dragging themselves shiveringly along to the resorts and dens where they harboured at night—or else to such places as would afford them any kind of shelter against the chilling and damping atmosphere. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley, protected by their paletots,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and smoking their cigars, boldly faced the inclement night. The lieutenant-colonel was not unlike his brother Octavian,—being of the middle height and of slender figure: he likewise wore a moustache—but his hair was somewhat darker. He had a military look, and was altogether a personage of prepossessing appearance. Such was the companion whom Captain Stanley had found for his present excursion.

Having crossed Westminster Bridge and passed some little way down the Waterloo Road, they plunged into the maze of close streets, alleys, and courts which lie in that neighbourhood. Presently they encountered a police-constable; and him they accosted. Captain Stanley acquainted the officer in a few words with the business which they had in hand; and desired his succour. The request was backed by a piece of gold; and an affirmative answer was at once returned.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the constable; "and I will soon show you a little of low life in London."

He led them along two or three narrow and obscure streets; then he turned into a court, which was but feebly lighted by the rays struggling through the dingy window-panes of the sombre-looking houses. Two or three of the front-doors stood open; and women loosely apparelled, and with looks of brazen immodesty, stood upon the thresholds. They flung forth filthy gibes and obscene jests at the passers-by; and when the policeman roughly bade them hold their tongues, they vomited forth torrents of abuse,—closing their doors at length, but only to open their windows and continue their hideous outpouring. The constable led the two officers to the extremity of the court, and knocked sharply at a door which was shut. It was speedily opened by a wretched-looking old man; and without the slightest ceremony, the police-officer entered, followed by Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley. Pushing open a side-door, and abruptly drawing forth his bull's-eye, or lantern, the constable threw the light into the room: but there was no one there. An inner door however immediately opened; and it vomited forth so loathsome a flood of human nature, that the two officers gazed with mingled horror and dismay on those hideous specimens of the lowest of both sexes.

The room into which they thus poured themselves, was almost entirely denuded of furniture: but that from which they had emerged, had the floor almost completely covered with filthy mattresses; and both had their walls and ceilings as grimy and blackened as if the whitewasher's brush had never touched them. Old men and boys—elderly women and young girls, formed this motley group, a glance over which sent a sickening sensation to the heart. Rags and filth—the stamp of poverty and the impress of crime—misfortune and vice—ugliness and deformity in all their most revolting shapes—together with the brazen hardihood of female depravity, were the jumbled characteristics of this loathsome scene.

"Now, gentlemen," said the police-constable, "is the person you want amongst these?"

"No: he is a boy of about curteen, with a sickly appearance, and very sharp features," answered Captain Stanley, who thus had his tale ready.

Significant looks were rapidly exchanged amidst the motley crew,—these looks being as much as to imply that the individual so described was not any where upon the premises, nor was he indeed known to them,—which was not astonishing, inasmuch as the pretended object of the search was of Captain Stanley's own imaginative creation. But the visitors observed that a young woman, on hearing that description, disappeared from among the group; and returning into the inner room, she issued forth by a door opening into the passage. She hastened up-stairs; and a door was speedily heard to open and shut on the first landing.

"Well, gentlemen," said the police-constable, "if the boy is not here, we must look into the rooms up-stairs."

"You won't find him," said the old man who had opened the front door, and who had lingered in the passage: he was the landlord of this loathsome lodging-house.

"We sha'n't take your word for it, Mr. Dyson," said the constable, purposely assuming a decided air. "I know you of old; and there is not a better keeper of a padding-ken in all London than you are for stalling off us policemen."

The old man grumbled something; and the constable led the way up the staircase. The other floors were visited; and they abounded in similar specimens of lost, degraded, and demoralized humanity as those which were seen below. That small house, which according to its size would have only just sufficed for the residence of a decent family of half-a-dozen in number, contained a swarm of at least fifty persons, huddling and herding together like so many swine—breathing an atmosphere which seemed fraught with pestilence—and rendering the entire place a hotbed for all the elements of plague, cholera, and the fearfullest epidemics.

The police-constable and the two officers issued forth from the house, and were speedily outside the court.

"Did you observe, gentlemen," asked the constable, "that girl who suddenly disappeared from the ground-floor rooms and hurried up-stairs——"

"Yes. What was her object?"

"It was to tell those above that it was all right—that they might make themselves easy, for it was none of them who were wanted. Suppose for argument's sake that you had given a true description—inadvertently letting it slip out of your mouth,—and suppose that the person who was really wanted had been all the time up-stairs,—the warning would have been quickly given, and an escape effected by a back window, or perhaps a trap-door on the top of the house. Ah! gentlemen, you don't know what dodges the keepers of these padding-ken are up to for the purpose of helping those who lodge with them."

The police-officer now conducted Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley to another house in the same neighbourhood, and where suppers were going on in every room. It was the resort of beggars and tramps, and was seldom frequented by thieves,—the mendicants who patronized it, endeavouring to keep it as "select" as possible! For there are aristocracies, grades, and distinctions even amongst the lowest strata of society, and amidst the whole range of demoralization's sphere. In every room throughout this lodging-house, the tables were covered with immense joints and dishes of vegetables: the knives and forks were all chained to the tables; the beer was drunk out of the commonest brown mugs—for no publican would trust his pewter pots within the walls of that place. The atmosphere was of the sickliest description—hot, fetid, and nauseating—made up of the breaths of many persons, the odours of the damp rags which wrapped their forms, the steam of the greasy viands, and the strong smell of the vegetables. But what hideous objects were the beings who were thus banquetting! The blind, the halt, and the maimed—the paralysed and the consumptive—as well as the hale, lusty, and strong—the sturdy beggar who obtains charity by coercive insolence, and the whining one who elicits it by his piteous tale—the one who for twenty years has always had a wife and five small children perishing at home—the woman who every day for the last dozen years has had a husband lying dead and no money to bury him—the girl of sixteen who ever since she was ten has told the same tale of having only just come out of the hospital and got no home nor father or mother—that great hulking fellow in a ragged seaman's garb, whose daily narrative of shipwreck and loss of all he possessed, has won for him five shillings in the course of a few hours' wandering—the sanctimonious-looking, calculating vagrant, whose diurnal reckoning is that from eleven to five he can traverse sixty streets and in every street pick up at least a penny, so that his daily income is likewise five shillings—the elderly woman dressed in widow's weeds, who every day for the last five-and-twenty years has just lost an excellent husband and been thrown out of a once happy home—the ingenious fellow who in the winter-time is a starved-out gardener, and in the summer-time a factory operative suffering from the badness of the times,—all these, and other varieties of imposture and mendicant roguery, were fully represented at this congress of joyously feasting beggars.

On quitting the scene which we have just described, the constable conducted the two officers to the large tap-room of a public-house situated in the neighbourhood of a saloon where theatrical representations, singing, and dancing take place. Previously to entering this tap-room, the policeman informed Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley that every individual whom they would see there was a noted thief—and that there would not be one present who had not figured in the police-courts—many at the sessions—some at the Old Bailey—and all more or less often upon the treadmill. With this information the place was entered: a few knowing winks were bestowed upon the police-constable; but apart from these familiar signs of recognition, little attention was paid to the visitors. The frequenters of that place were accustomed to behold "swells," as they denominated them, drop in to see a little of London life—or, on the other hand, to search after some thief who had exercised his manipulating skill upon them. All the varied and manifold impressions which villany and crime, in their different grades and degrees, can stamp upon the human countenance, might be discerned in that room;—and, heavens! what a study for the phrenologist! Wherefore go to Newgate to inspect the plaster casts of the countenances of defunct criminals, when there are these haunts in London where the faces of shoals of living evil-doers can be studied, and with all the more fearful accuracy—with all the more frightfully real intensity, inasmuch as the worst and darkest passions which are known to the human soul can be then observed working upon animated features and in their most hideous vitality.

At the numerous tables in this room the company were seated,—all of them smoking, and all drinking too—but the liquors were varied according to tastes and pecuniary resources: so that passing through those grades which were represented by the daring burglar—the bold thief—the cunning larcenist—the pitiful area-sneak—or the miserable pudding-stealer,—a corresponding gamut might be specified in the form of steaming punch—tumblers of hot spirits-and-water—quarterns of gin—pots of ale—and pints of porter. In this delectable place Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley remained for about half-an-hour,—at the expiration of which they took their departure, still accompanied by the police-officer. Three or four other dens of depravity were visited; and it was now past midnight: but as yet not the slightest sign was discerned of the objects of their search. They did not of course think it of the slightest use to visit the house in which the Burker and the Scotts had been wont to live, nor to take the slightest trouble in watching the premises of the Smedleys: for there could be little doubt that the Burker and Bill Scott had kept out of the way at the time they must have known the trial was coming on at Liverpool, so as to be on their guard in case of a result perilous to their own personal safety. And now, too, that the intelligence of this result had arrived in London, it was all the more certain that the ruffian and his guilty accomplice would have taken the best possible precautions to elude the search which was sure to be instituted after them.

Captain Stanley and Lord Charles now held a consultation with the police-constable: for a certain idea had struck the first-mentioned gentleman; and he thus expressed himself:—

"Thanks to your assistance, constable, we have received the initiative into the various phases which the haunts of crime, vice, poverty, and debauchery exhibit. But it strikes me there must be places which such villains as those of whom we are in search, would specially seek under existing circumstances, and whence the very first glimpse of a police-officer's uniform would scare them away. Now, are not these likewise places into which it may be possibly sought to inveigle those well-dressed persons who might chance to be in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes—there are such places," replied the constable: "but it would be next to madness for you to seek to penetrate into them. You would risk your life: but even if you escaped with that, you might reckon with certainty upon being robbed and ill-treated."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Captain Stanley, "only show me such a place as we have been speaking of, and I will risk everything!"

"And I assuredly am not the man to flinch from such danger," said Lord Charles Meredith. "But there is one thing to be thought of. If it be possible for us to obtain admission to such a place, would not the detectives themselves assume a particular apparel and penetrate thither?"

"Bless you, sir," answered the constable; "those kind of villains would recognise the detectives in a moment, no matter how disguised. They are keen and cunning enough to distinguish between real gentlemen, such as you are, and other persons drest up to play the part of gentlemen. That you can get into these haunts of which we are speaking, there is little doubt: indeed you are pretty sure to be invited there by those who would at once mark you as their prey. But I again warn you of the risk you will have to run; and unless you are well armed——"

"We took that precaution before we set out," interrupted Captain Stanley. "We have each a brace of double-barrelled pistols and a good clasp-knife upon our persons."

"And this stick of mine," added Lord Charles Meredith, "though it seems only a gentleman's walking-cane, is a life-preserver and well loaded at the top."

"Then you are decided, gentlemen?" asked the constable, still with a hesitating and dubious manner: "for recollect that I cannot accompany you."

"We are decided," said Captain Stanley. "Lead the way as far as you consider it prudent to conduct us, in order to show us the route."

The constable accordingly struck into another labyrinth of low streets, alleys, and courts, all of which he assured Lord Charles and Captain Stanley were swarming with loathsome life like a morass with reptiles; and the two gentlemen soon lost every idea of their whereabouts. At length the constable stopped short in the middle of a narrow street, feebly lighted with gas-lamps, and where the houses all had a dark and sinister appearance.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I must accompany you no further—or my presence may frustrate the object you have in view. Proceed to the end of this street—take the turning to the right and the second to the left. If you could make a pretence of being in liquor, it will serve your purpose all the better. I need tell you no more: for if anything happens to forward your views, it will take place somewhere about the spot to which I am directing you—and you will be enabled to judge for yourselves."

Another liberal donation rewarded the police-constable for his civility and his assistance; and he then parted company from Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley.

CHAPTER XLIX.

MOTHER BAMBRIDGE'S ESTABLISHMENT.

FOLLOWING the constable's directions, the two adventurous military officers took the turn to the right and then the second to the left,—this latter bringing them into an alley which was very narrow at its entrance, but suddenly widened somewhat as they advanced into it, from the fact of the houses being built farther back on either side. These houses which thus stood back, were higher than those at the entrance of the alley, and they had wooden fences in front, enclosing what were meant to be little bits of garden, about a couple of yards wide.

Midway down the alley stood two public-houses, nearly fronting each other: or to be more particular still, one was a public-house and the other a beer-shop. Over the former was a flaring gas-light—over the latter a lamp of more modest pretensions: but the two together illumined all that part of the alley. Lights were still burning in several of the adjacent houses; and as the drizzling rain had by this time ceased, there was no misty veil to obscure the light thus thrown forth. From both public-house and beer-shop the sounds of uproarious revelry pealed forth, and in such discordant strains as to leave a doubt in the minds of the two officers whether there was not as much wrangling as merriment in the din which thus smote their ears. In front, too, of both these houses of entertainment several loose women,—some apparelled with flaunting pretension—were loitering in company with men who were dressed in what may be termed a "swellish style."

A little beyond the beer-shop, a black doll with a piece of white calico wrapped round, doubtless to serve as a frock, swung over the door of a rag and bottle shop,—the windows of which displayed pictures in rudely executed water colours, representing plum-puddings, as an intimation that housewives by means of thrift in disposing of their dripping, their rags, and their broken glass, might at the end of the year save up sufficient to provide the Christmas comestible thus illustrated. Nearly opposite the shop just named, was a marine-store dealer's; and both establishments were open, although it was now close upon one in the morning. The light of candles shone dimly forth from the doorways; and every now and then an individual—male or female—might be seen coming from the opposite extremity of the alley and diving abruptly into one or the other of these shops,—having however in the first instance cast a rapid glance of scrutiny around, to make sure that no police-constable was nigh. It required no prompting beyond what their own common sense suggested, to enable the two officers to judge that both the marine-store dealer's and the rag-shop were in reality receptacles for stolen goods, and that it was for the accommodation of their patrons they thus kept open so late.

Mindful of the friendly constable's advice, Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith affected to be somewhat the worse for liquor as they advanced within the sphere of light.

"Where the deuce have our wandering steps brought us?" exclaimed Stanley, purposely speaking loud enough to be overheard by the loiterers in front of the two houses of entertainment.

"I have no more idea than the man in the moon," responded Lord Charles. "It was all owing to that last bottle of wine——"

"Well, never mind!" cried Stanley, with a well-assumed manner of devil-me-care rakishness. "We *must* get somewhere at last—that's very certain."

They were now both surrounded by the flauntingly dressed women whose bullies and flash men purposely hung back, thinking it better to keep aloof until the girls should have got the "swells" in regular tow.

"Treat us to a glass of wine," said one: "there's a dear fellow!"

"Or what is better, come home with us," exclaimed another, "and we'll send out for the wine."

It naturally struck the two gentlemen that this was the sort of scene to which the constable had alluded when he had said that they would be enabled to judge for themselves whether their desired object would be forwarded in this alley to which he had directed them. They therefore made up their minds simultaneously, and as if by tacit understanding, to accompany the girls: but they pretended to hesitate in a tipsy manner for some little time before they gave a final assent. At length they moved slowly along in the direction whither a couple of the flauntingly apparelled creatures led them; and a glance over their shoulders showed that there was a move amongst the flashily dressed men in front of the public-houses. The girls conducted them to the farther extremity of the alley, where they stopped at the door of a house of considerable size in comparison with the others in the same neighbourhood. One of the girls knocked at the door in a manner that was evidently peculiar, and therefore intended to serve as a signal—but which would not have been noticed if the two officers were really in their cups, as they pretended to be. The summons was answered by a tawdrily dressed elderly woman, in a gown of rusty black silk, a cap flaunting with pink ribbons, and with a gold chain—or at least a very good imitation of one—hanging over her enormously protruberant bust. Her naturally rubicund countenance had upon it a still deeper flush, produced by recent potations; and she simpered and smiled with an air of half-tipsy vacancy. She bade the gentlemen walk in,—whisperingly asking whether they chose to be accommodated with separate chambers at once?

"We are going to drink a bottle of wine first," answered Captain Stanley, who did not consider it expedient to be parted from his companion.

"By all means!" said the mistress of the establishment: and she led the way into a back parlour of some dimensions and tolerably well furnished.

The two girls who had accompanied the officers, flung off their bonnets and shawls; and Captain Stanley, still preserving his tipsy air, tossed a couple of sovereigns upon the table, desiring that wine might be fetched. An elderly servant-woman entered the room to receive the order from the mistress of the establishment, who had likewise seated herself there; and after a few minutes' absence she returned with a couple of bottles of wine. She handed all the balance of the money to Mother Bambridge—as the mistress was called—and which sum of thirty shillings Mother Bambridge coolly consigned to her own pocket. Glasses were placed upon the table: but both Stanley and Meredith were careful not to touch a drop of the wine until they had first seen Mother Bambridge and the girls empty their own glasses. Being thus satisfied that the liquor was not previously drugged, the two officers began to drink in order to keep up appearances; and they likewise chatted away as if in a reckless strain of dissipated hilarity.

Half-an-hour passed; and the gentlemen began to think that they had got into the midst of some adventure that was quite different from what the advising constable had anticipated, and that it was by no means of a nature to throw them in the way of the attainment of their object. But all of a sudden something was said by one of the girls, which turned all their thoughts into a new channel.

"This sherry is capital!" were the words thus spoken. "Wouldn't poor Barney like a glass?"

Rapid was the deprecating glance which Mother Bambridge flung upon the girl, as much as to give her to understand that she should not have mentioned a name which might possibly be recognised by the two gentlemen in connexion with the newspaper report of the previous day's trial at Liverpool: and then, with a simpering air, she said to Meredith and Stanley, "It's a poor dear invalid brother of mine that the kind-hearted young lady is alluding to; and with your permission I will just step up-stairs to him with a glass of this wine, which is sure to do him good."

"By all means!" exclaimed Lord Charles, now looking more tipsy than ever; "and send out to get us a fresh supply."

Thus speaking, he in his turn tossed from a well-filled purse a couple of sovereigns upon the table; and Mother Bambridge, having given a suitable order to the servant, poured out a glass of wine, and therewith quitted the room. The reader will comprehend the significancy conveyed by the words of the girl who had recommended the wine to be carried up to the man whom she had named. It was to afford Mrs. Bambridge a feasible pretext for leaving the room in order to make whatsoever arrangements she might deem necessary for the plunder of her guests—and all this without the risk, as it was hoped, of exciting their suspicions. Meredith and Stanley penetrated the manœuvre promptly and clearly enough: but affecting to become more and more influenced by the effects of liquor, they played their game so admirably as to prevent the slightest misgiving from entering the minds of the two girls. The name of Barney had been unmistakably pronounced; and as it was not altogether a common one, and was precisely the familiar appellation by which the principal object of their search was known—moreover, as it was in some such low neighbourhood as this that they had hoped and expected to fall in with him—and likewise as Mother Bambridge's look of warning significancy must be taken into account,—they were morally certain that the individual alluded to was he whom they sought. But there were evidently a number of desperate characters about—succour would be promptly at hand—the utmost caution must be used; and thus they could not instantaneously adopt any measure towards accomplishing his capture. Sudden violence on their part might fail: and therefore they must wait yet a little while and trust to circumstances. But we must observe that all the time Mother Bambridge was absent, Stanley listened attentively to catch the sounds of her footsteps—though he appeared to drink as if being intent on nothing of the sort.

The girls dropped several hints about retiring: but it by no means suited the two gentlemen's views to be separated; and moreover they had an excellent excuse for remaining where they were, at least for the present, by reminding their frail companions that a fresh supply of wine had been sent for. In a few moments Mrs. Bambridge re-appeared; and almost immediately afterwards the woman-servant entered with two fresh bottles of wine. These were opened; and one of the girls officiously filled the two gentleman's glasses: but the latter perceived that it was from the *first* supply, which was not completely exhausted, that the other glasses were replenished. They therefore at once comprehended that the wine last brought in was drugged.

"You do not drink?" said one of the girls, in a cajoling manner to Stanley.

"I am already tipsy enough," was the response, given in a hiccupping manner.

"Oh, no!—do try one more glass."

Stanley reached forth his hand: and with every appearance of drunken awkwardness he upset the glass.

"I'm sure you're not so clumsy," said the other girl to Lord Charles.

"Let's try," answered the nobleman: and lifting the glass, he spilt all its contents down his paletot.

Both the girls affected to laugh: but at the same time they darted suspicious looks towards Mrs. Bambridge.

"Who can sing a good song?" asked Stanley, with the hope of giving a turn to the proceedings and averting the suspicions which he saw were awakened.

"It just happens," replied Mother Bambridge, with her simpering air, "that there are three or four gentlemen—real gentlemen, like yourselves—in the front parlour; and they seem as much inclined as you to make a night of it. They sing capital songs; and with your leave I'll go and fetch them."

She quitted the room accordingly; and during her absence, which lasted two or three minutes, the girls again endeavoured to cajole the officers into retiring: but they were resolved not to be separated—and they vowed, with tipsy declamation, that they would not go to bed till daylight.

Mother Bambridge re-appeared, with the four "gentleman" of whom she had spoken; and the two officers at once recognised some of the flashily dressed fellows whom they had seen hanging aloof behind the girls in front of the public-houses. The four bullies—for such indeed the new-comers were—themselves affected to be drunk; and sitting down, they began singing a bacchanalian song. The girls endeavoured to persuade Lord Charles and Stanley to drink of the last supply of wine—but as a matter of course, without effect. The looks which the women rapidly exchanged grew more and more suspicious, as the excuses of the officers for refusing to drink became proportionately more and more transparent,—their conduct now being so little consistent with that of tipsy men: and yet they had no alternative but to persist in the refusal, even at the risk of having their aim altogether frustrated.

"Come now," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Bambridge, rising up from her seat; "I must have the house quiet—or else I shall stand the chance of being indicted. You must all be off to bed without any more delay."

A crisis was now reached: Lord Charles and Stanley knew full well that if they separated from each other, they were almost certain to become the prey of superior numbers: for they had no doubt that there were even more bullies at hand than those who were present; and their only chance of a successful resistance, in case of violence, was to keep together. But a thought suddenly flashed to Stanley's mind; and affecting to drop his pocket-handkerchief close to where Lord Charles sate, he pretended to fall completely upon him as he stooped to pick it up. This manœuvre afforded him the opportunity of rapidly whispering, "Let us suffer ourselves to be robbed without the slightest resistance."

"Come, do you hear?" cried Mrs. Bambridge: "off with you to bed!"

"If you won't let us sit up any longer," said Stanley, hiccupping at every word, "I shall go and finish the night at the public house."

"Bravo!" cried one of the four bullies: "and we'll go with you."

The door of the room was now opened: Stanley and Lord Charles rose staggeringly from their chairs, and with uneven steps walked into the passage,—a girl clinging to the arm of each. In the darkness of that passage, they each felt that their purses and watches were dexterously filched from them: they pretended not to notice it—the front-door was opened—and as they passed out, it was slammed behind them—neither bullies nor girls being now any longer in their company.

They walked away from the immediate vicinage of the place, and observed that both public-house and beer-shop were now shut up. This was of no consequence to them: for, as the reader may suppose, Stanley had all along no intention of adjourning to either of those places. The dawn of morning was now glimmering; and as they looked back, they perceived the head of one of the girls thrust out of an upper window. They made her an apparently friendly sign; and still staggering along, stopped short, as if in astonishment, before the shut-up public-house. Then, with the air of men who determined to carry their tipsy frolics to some place which was yet open, they passed out of the alley,—another glance thrown backwards, showing that the girl was still watching their movements.

"Now, my dear fellow," said Lord Charles Meredith, when they were out of the alley, and therefore out of view of the house which they had recently left, "pray explain yourself—for to tell you the truth, I cannot for the life of me understand this last proceeding on your part."

"It is easily explained," responded Stanley: "but we have yet much to do—and the most difficult as well as the most perilous part of our enterprise is still to be performed."

"Proceed: I am all attention," rejoined the nobleman. "But unless we get back our purses and our watches, it will be rather an expensive night's entertainment," he added with a laugh.

"Those we may give up for lost," answered Stanley: "but I think we may hold that loss cheap enough, if we succeed in surrendering a murderer into the hands of justice."

"But your project?" said Lord Charles, inquiringly. "Do you mean to go and fetch the police?"

"No. As we have commenced the business by ourselves," answered Stanley, "we will have the satisfaction of carrying it out. Listen, Meredith! We have excellent reason to believe that the villain Barney is in that house—and what is more, that he is in the room precisely above that where we were seated: for I was attentive to the sounds of Mother Bambridge's footsteps when she went up with the wine. These are great points gained—and far more than we could have expected as the result of the first night's search. But the first night's search shall be the last—or I am very much mistaken. I see that you do not understand me. Let us turn into this street; it is the one behind the alley from which we have emerged."

"And your reason for letting us be robbed so quietly?" inquired Lord Charles.

"Those bullies were evidently brought in to pounce upon us suddenly when Mother Bambridge hoped to persuade us to go up-stairs to bed. If, an attack being made, we had resisted them, we should have shown ourselves to be sober; and whether conquerors or conquered, the suspicion which our behaviour had already excited, would have been confirmed. The wretches would have felt convinced that we had an ulterior object; perhaps they would have supposed that we were looking for Barney: but at all events for security's sake they would quickly have got him off to some other lurking-hole. As it is, all suspicion is completely set at rest: they flatter themselves they had to do with a couple of gentlemen who were really tipsy; and rest assured that having watched us out of the alley, they are lulled into the completest security. Such is the result of our having suffered ourselves to be robbed so quietly, as you express it."

"And what do you think Mother Bambridge went up-stairs for to the villain's room? or how can you tell that it was his room at all?" asked the nobleman.

"Of course I can but surmise," responded Stanley; "and upon this surmise we must act. She doubtless went up to him to bid him be in readiness in case his services should be required to help in dealing with us. When she went out the second time to fetch in the bullies, it was really to the front parlour she proceeded: for I listened to the course that her footsteps took."

"Now, what is your plan?" inquired Lord Charles Meredith.

Captain Stanley rapidly explained it; and his noble friend unhesitatingly agreed to succour him in carrying it out.

The little colloquy that we have described, brought them to the extremity of the narrow street which they had entered, and which ran parallel to the alley. A very few minutes' observation showed them that the house which was immediately behind Mother Bambridge's establishment, was a small chandlery-shop; and Stanley observed to his noble friend, "This is all the better for our purpose; because a money-making tradesman of a mean and peddling description will forgive us for awakening him if we slip a five-pound note into his hand."

"I do verily believe, my dear fellow," answered Lord Charles, "that you have forgotten the little circumstance of our purses being left behind in the adjacent alley."

"No—I have not forgotten it," responded Stanley: and drawing forth his pocket-book from the breast of his under-coat, he displayed a roll of bank-notes.

They now knocked at the door of the chandlery-shop; and in a few minutes a head with a cotton night-cap on, was thrust from an upper window. The owner of the head and the night-cap was about to give vent to his indignation at being knocked up by a couple of rakes, as he thought, out upon their nocturnal frolics: but a few quickly uttered words from Captain Stanley's lips, and the display of a bank-note, made a prompt change in the man's temper. He drew in his head—shut down the window—and in a couple of minutes appeared at his shop-door,—having just huddled on a sufficiency of clothing for decency's sake. He admitted the two officers, and then inquired their business.

Captain Stanley, closing the door of the shop, put the five-pound note into the man's hand; and said to him, "Don't be alarmed—and don't ask any unnecessary questions: but we want, in the first place, to peep through one of the back windows of your dwelling."

The chandler, who was an active, bustling, eccentric little man, stared in amazement at this request; and recurring to his former opinion that the whole proceeding was an impudent frolic, he examined the note, expecting to find that it issued from the Bank of Elegance instead of the Bank of England. On discovering however that it was really genuine, he became perfectly civil once more; and thinking he had better humour his two customers, whatever their object might be—if indeed they had any at all—he conducted them into his little parlour, which was behind the shop. There was an outside shutter to the window; and the prismatic rays of the morning light—for it was the middle of the month of June—penetrated through a heart-shaped hole in that shutter. By means of this hole Stanley was enabled to take his survey of the rear of the chandler's dwelling. There was a little yard separated by a low wall from a larger yard which belonged to Mother Bambridge's establishment: at every one of the back windows of that establishment the blinds were drawn down; and therefore it was reasonable to suppose that the inmates had retired to rest, well contented with their spoil in the shape of handsome watches, massive chains, and well-filled purses.

"Have you got a ladder?" inquired Stanley of the chandler.

The volatile little man made one bound of astonishment at this question so abruptly put; and then he looked dismayed as the idea flashed to his mind that he had to do with two lunatics just escaped from an asylum. The two supposed lunatics could not help smiling at these variations of expression on the chandler's countenance; and Stanley, perceiving the necessity of giving some sort of explanation, addressed him as follows:—

"My good fellow, I need not tell you that the place which we see opposite is a den of infamy. I and my companion have just been robbed there; and we mean to get in by some means or another, to compel the wretches to disgorge their plunder. Now will you assist us—or will you not?"

"Ah, that I cheerfully will!" exclaimed the little man: "for that Mother Bambridge is the scandal of the neighbourhood, and never spends a single penny at my shop."

The ludicrous connexion of indignant morality and mortified selfishness which characterised the chandler's observation, provoked another smile on the part of the two officers: but he was now ready to render them his assistance—and that was the essential. He led them forth into his little yard, and showed them a ladder, which Stanley at a glance saw was just high enough for his purpose. The wall separating the two yards was quickly scaled by the Captain and Lord Charles—the chandler not offering to accompany them out of his own premises: for he was not endowed with a large amount of courage. The chief danger to be now apprehended, was that their proceedings might be observed from the infamous house, should any of the inmates be still up. Not a single blind however was seen to move: no sign was there of aught threatening to disturb them.

The ladder was placed against the window of the room over the parlour to which the two officers had been conducted when in the house; and Captain Stanley, with his right hand in his coat-pocket ready to draw forth a pistol, began to ascend the ladder,—Lord Charles Meredith remaining at the foot. On reaching the window, which had a dingy calico blind drawn down inside, the Captain immediately perceived that the sashes were not fastened; and this was an immense advantage in favour of the success of the enterprise. As noiselessly as possible did he begin raising the lower sash; and when he had thus lifted it about a foot, he raised the blind in order to peep in. A bed was near the window: a man lay upon it, with his clothes on; and on a chair by the side of that bed was a brace of pistols. The man was sleeping heavily: but a curtain concealed the upper part of his body—so that Captain Stanley could not discern his countenance; and the curtain was beyond the reach of his outstretched arm from the position where he now stood. He thrust up the sash a little higher, and was now enabled to reach the back of the chair on which the pistols lay. Lifting the chair completely up, he set it gently down again close within the window; and removing the pistols thence, consigned them to the pocket of his paletot. Then he beckoned Lord Charles Meredith, who attentively and anxiously watched his proceedings, to ascend the ladder.

The sash was raised yet a little higher; and still the man slept on as if he were under the influence of liquor. Stanley passed into the room; but the cord of the blind getting entangled round his foot, made him stumble against the chair. The man sprang up from the bed like a wild beast suddenly awakened from its lair; and the first glimpse of his countenance convinced Stanley that he was now confronted by none other than the terrible Burker himself.

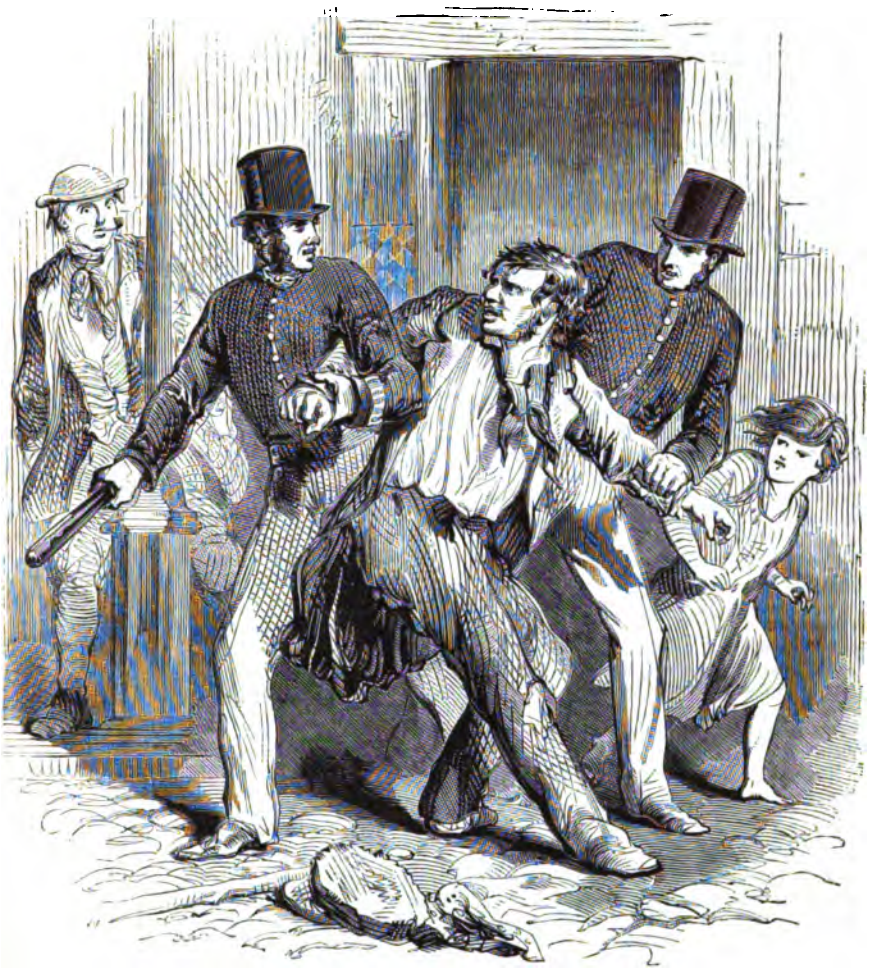
The ruffian glanced towards the chair with the evident intention of snatching up his pistols; and perceiving they were gone, a cry of savage rage, like that of a hyæna, burst from his lips. Captain Stanley drew forth a pistol—presented it at the Burker's head—and bade him surrender or he was a dead man. But with the sudden fury of the wild beast unto whose howling cry we just now likened that of the ruffian, he sprang upon Stanley—hurled him upon the floor—seized the pistol from his grasp—and was on the very point of discharging its contents at his head, when his arm was caught in a powerful grasp—the weapon was wrested from him—and he himself in his turn was hurled upon the floor. All this was the work of a few seconds; and we need hardly inform the reader that it was Lord Charles Meredith who springing into the room, thus saved the life of his adventurous friend.

The very instant that the Burker was thus levelled, Lord Charles Meredith's knee was upon his chest: and the threat was repeated, that he must surrender or have his brains blown out. But the two officers had to deal with a man of the most desperate and determined character,—a man too who possessed the brute strength and courage of a lion. Hurling Meredith off him, he rose as far as his knees, when he was assailed by Stanley, whom he likewise dashed away; and then snatching up a chair, he hurled it with all his force at the head of Meredith who was returning to the assault. The nobleman however darted sufficiently aside to save his head, and received the blow upon his shoulder: but it made him stagger—and for an instant he was smitten with the idea that his arm was broken. All this too was but the work of a few instants,—during which however either one of the officers might have shot the ruffian dead: but it was by no means their purpose to save the hangman his duty, unless at the last extremity in defence of their own lives. As for Barney the Burker,—he dared not roar out for assistance, for fear of arousing the whole neighbourhood: but by hurling the chair at Meredith, he gained a moment's time to do that which seemed to answer his own purpose equally well: for he seized hold of a cord, which passing through a hole in the ceiling, hung against the wall; and a bell sent its clanging sound through the house.

"It is useless for you to resist!" exclaimed Stanley, again rushing upon the villain just as he was about to tear open the door: and at the same instant Meredith seized upon him by the other arm,—both now clinging to him with a desperate tenacity.

And desperate too were the struggles of the ruffian—diabolically savage was the expression of his features, as he endeavoured to bite his assailants; and were it not that his great clumsy shoes were off, he would undoubtedly have broken their legs with the tremendous kicks that he dealt. And now there were the sounds of numerous persons rushing about the house: the door was burst open—and the four bullies whom the two adventurous officers had already seen beneath that roof, rushed in. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley were in a moment overpowered by numbers—they were made prisoners—and now, as the only chance left of ensuring the capture of the Burker, they both shouted with all their might for assistance. Vainly did they endeavour to release their arms from the grasp of the bullies that they might get at their pistols: they could not.

The instant the Burker was freed, he rushed to the window: but beholding the chandler in the adjoining yard, he fancied that a trap was set for him in that direction—and he resolved to escape



by the front door; for he felt assured that the whole neighbourhood would be quickly aroused. Snatching up his shoes, his cap, and his club, he darted from the room—rushed with the reckless brutal violence of a mad bull through the bevy of half-naked girls who were gathered in a fright on the landing—knocked down Mother Bambridge as she suddenly emerged from a ground-floor room in which she slept—and tearing open the front-door, darted forth. He ran along the alley with all his might: but just as he reached the front of the public-house, a couple of policemen emerged from a little court that led out from that part of the alley. Their strong arms clutched hold of the Burker; and as he offered a desperate resistance, the bludgeon of one of the officers dealt him a blow which rendered him powerless.

At the same moment Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith—having managed to escape from the bullies with whom we left them in conflict, and at whose hands they had received no small amount of ill-treatment, though fortunately no serious injury—arrived upon the spot where the Burker was thus captured; and they had the gratification of finding that he was safe in the hands of the law's myrmidons after all.

CHAPTER L.

THE INTERVIEW.

Christian Ashton, on being dismissed from the employment which the literary mania of the Earl of Lascelles had furnished him, would have consulted Mr. Redcliffe as to the course which he should now adopt with a view to obtain another situation: but that gentleman was absent from London, relative to the trial of Lettice Rodney.

Our young hero visited his sister Christina, and acquainted her with everything that had occurred. He displayed so much grief at this sudden and cruel separation from Isabella Vincent—he spoke so fervidly of the love which he cherished towards her—and declared with such passionate vehemence that his happiness was entirely centred in that beauteous and charming creature, that Christina from her brother's words and manner acquired a somewhat deeper reading into the mysteries of her own heart; and she could now less than ever mistake the feeling which she herself entertained towards Lord Octavian Meredith. But she did her best to console and encourage her brother; and perhaps with this amiable purpose in view, she spoke more cheerfully of the hope which a faithful love might entertain than was perfectly consistent with the misgivings she secretly experienced on behalf of Christian's passion. For she could not help seeing that it was indeed most unlikely the Earl of Lascelles would ever consent to bestow his niece upon an obscure young man totally dependent on his own industry for his bread.

Nevertheless, as we have just observed—Christina—with the kindest of motives—spoke cheeringly to her brother; and he went away from that interview comforted, and with a sense of reviving hope. As he wended his way back towards his lodgings in Kensington, he felt himself gradually falling into those day-dreams in which youthful lovers are wont to indulge; and his thoughts flowed in something like the following channel:—

"Who can tell what the future may have in store for me? Heaven has often blessed the loves of those whose prospects at the outset were even darker than mine. Ah! if I could but obtain one more interview with Isabella—if we could once more exchange vows and protestations of eternal fidelity—I should feel happier: my mind would become more settled—and I should have a better heart to search after fresh employment. But as it is, I feel at a loss how to act: I can fix my thoughts upon nothing decisive. Oh, yes! to see her once more—to receive from her sweet lips the assurance that under no circumstances of persuasion or coercion will she ever become another's,—this indeed were happiness! Then, inspired with fondest and brightest hope, I could battle with the world; and if industry and integrity ever throve by their own unassisted resources, I would assuredly carve out a position for myself. And who can tell but that the day will come when I may secure a competency, and thus feel myself justified in conducting Isabella to the altar? Our wants would be limited: a neat little rural habitation would suffice: and however humble its aspect, yet the light of love would gild the interior as if it were a splendid saloon, and impart a richer bloom to the flowers festooning outside. And we should be so happy—Oh, so happy!—and Isabella would never regret her uncle's palatial mansion."

Such reflections as these—which, as the reader may perceive, were borrowed from the fanciful realms of dream-land—wrapped the soul of the enthusiastic Christian in a species of ecstacy: but the pivot, be it observed, on which the whole vision turned, was the idea of first of all obtaining a parting interview with Isabella. He did not therefore immediately take any step to procure a new situation: nor did he for the present think of leaving his lodging in the vicinage of the Earl's mansion. He had plenty of ready money; and as his habits were frugal and inexpensive—his only extravagance consisting in the nicety and almost elegance of his apparel—he could subsist for some time on the resources which he had in hand. But how to obtain the interview with Isabella? This was the difficulty. For several days after he left the Earl's employment, he vainly busied himself in meditations upon the best means to carry out his view. More than once he thought of beseeching Lord Osmond's good offices: for it was evident to Christian that the young nobleman was far from unfavourable to the love-suit which had brought about so disastrous a catastrophe in the summer-house. But yet he applied not to Adolphus.

In the meanwhile the Countess of Lascelles and Lord Osmond had been particularly on their guard, for fear lest the old nobleman's suspicions should be revived. Nevertheless, Ethel continued to occupy those separate apartments which we have on a former occasion described; and on a variety of pretexts she avoided a return to the matrimonial couch. Lord Osmond deeply deplored Christian's departure from the mansion, as his presence there had caused a diversion in respect to Isabella which had thrown the young nobleman and Ethel constantly together. Now, since that catastrophe in the summer-house, Isabella had been almost constantly with the Countess; and Osmond began to despair of again enjoying Ethel's society alone.

As for the Earl himself,—he had been so bewildered by the incidents which led to Christian's summary dismissal, that for several days he knew not how to act or what to think. That his son and his niece were *not* lovers, as he had all along flattered himself, had suddenly been made apparent: that Christian and Isabella must have been far more together than he had supposed, was likewise evident: and that therefore Osmond must have been the companion of the Countess in the evening walks in the garden, was a natural deduction from those premises. Thus the old Earl was agitated with renewed suspicion: but a feeling of mingled pride and shame prevented him from again touching on the subject with his valet Makepeace, and likewise from taking any decisive step—such, for instance, as to insist that his son should again become an exile from the house.

At length Lord Osmond was determined to do something to bring about a change in affairs. His mad infatuation towards his youthful and lovely mother-in-law would not permit him to remain any longer so completely on his guard, nor to tolerate the almost complete severance from her which Isabella's presence in her ladyship's apartments necessitated. He spoke to Makepeace: but the valet could say nothing more than that the Earl maintained a strict silence with regard to recent events.

One morning—about ten days after Christian's abrupt dismissal from the house—Lord Osmond paid him a second visit at his lodgings. We have already said that our hero had more than once bethought himself of seeking the young nobleman's good offices towards obtaining an interview with

Isabella: but he hesitated,—fearful that he might be taking too great a liberty and trusting too far to the favourable feeling of the Earl's son. But now, when Lord Osmond entered his little sitting-room, Christian's countenance suddenly lighted up with mingled hope and joy.

"Still in the same place? and still without employment, my young friend?" said Adolphus, shaking Christian warmly by the hand.

"I cannot tear myself away from this neighbourhood," replied the youth, his cheeks glowing with blushes: "and now the truth is frankly told!"

"You entertain some hope?" said Lord Osmond. "Perhaps you wish to see Isabella——But of course you do!—it is natural enough!"

"Oh, for one parting interview!" exclaimed Christian enthusiastically; "and you know not, my lord, how deep would be my gratitude!"

"Well, we must manage it by some means or another," responded Adolphus. "Have you the courage to enter the grounds stealthily this evening, or to-morrow evening, on receipt of a note or message from me?"

Christian hesitated for a moment: the natural rectitude of his principles recoiled from the idea of thus violating the sanctity of premises whence he had been so pointedly dismissed. But a second thought told him that there was no more harm in entering the Earl's grounds against his consent, than in seeking an interview with his niece likewise in opposition to his will. Love therefore triumphed over all scruples; and he exclaimed, "Tell me how I can see Miss Vincent—if only for a few minutes—and I will risk everything. But think you, my lord, that she herself will be agreeable——"

"She loves you, Christian—and that assurance ought to be a sufficient answer. Hold yourself in readiness for a communication from me; and trust to my ingenuity to manage the matter. And now one word more ere I take my departure. You must look upon me as a friend, and regard me as such—even to the extent of making me your banker: for that is the proposal I have to offer without offending your delicacy."

Christian expressed his warmest gratitude for the young nobleman's kind consideration—but assured him that he possessed ample resources for the present. Adolphus then took his departure,—leaving the youth full of hope and joy at the prospect of so speedily obtaining the object of his enthusiastic wishes.

In the evening the Earl and Countess of Lascelles, Osmond, and Isabella were seated in the drawing-room between eight and nine o'clock partaking of coffee. Isabella was sad and dispirited, though she did her best to conceal what she felt: she was so afraid of angering her uncle. The Countess displayed the most amiable demeanour towards her husband, and was completely on her guard not to exchange so much as the most rapidly furtive glance with Adolphus. Lord Osmond chatted with every appearance of ease and gaiety; and as the Earl had drunk a few extra glasses of wine, he was in a much better humour than he had been since the adventure of the summer-house.

"Ah! now that I think of it, my dear father," said Lord Osmond, thus abruptly giving a turn to the previous conversation, "when are your memoirs to appear?"

"Why, the fact is, Adolphus," answered the Earl, "I have come well nigh to a full stop for the present: and without any disagreeable allusion"—and he glanced somewhat spitefully at his niece—"I have lost my right hand, as it were. Dictation was easy enough: but when I sit down to write for myself, I find my ideas rushing on—like what shall I say?——like a troop of wild elephants: but my penmanship can no more keep pace with them than—than—hem!—a lame donkey at a short trot."

"It is a great pity, my dear father," rejoined Adolphus, in an under-tone, so that Isabella could not overhear him, "that you have got rid of that very useful young man merely on account of a passing folly——"

"Don't mention it, Adolphus!" interrupted the Earl sharply: "he shall never enter my house again."

"Oh, no—of course not!" responded Lord Osmond, finding that the little feeler he had thrown out experienced such a rebuff. "But really it is cruel of you to keep the public on the tenter-hooks of suspense awaiting that work of yours, which has already been so extensively advertised. You must permit me to look out for another secretary——or else," added Lord Osmond, in the hope of putting his father into the most amiable of humours, "I must act as your amanuensis for an hour or two every day."

"No!—would you, Adolphus?" exclaimed the old Earl, catching eagerly at the proposition.

"With the utmost pleasure," was Lord Osmond's ready response. "We will commence to-morrow morning, if you will."

"That we will!" exclaimed the Earl, forgetting everything else in his joy at the sort of compliment conveyed by his son's supposed anxiety in respect to the forthcoming work. "I will go this minute to the library, and sit down for an hour or two to rack my imagination and invent——I mean arrange the papers in readiness for to-morrow."

"Pray do!" said Lord Osmond: "for I am now all eagerness to begin. And perhaps, as it is so sultry in-doors and the evening is so beautiful, the ladies would accept my escort for a ramble in the garden?"

The Earl made a passing grimace at the proposition—for he retrospected not lovingly upon those evening rambles: but as the thought flashed to his mind that his niece must remain the whole time in companionship with Adolphus and Ethel, he uttered not a syllable of objection, and hastened away to the library,—intent upon the concoction of some startling incident for the morrow's lucubrations. The Countess and Isabella rang for their shawls; and Lord Osmond, hurrying down stairs for a moment, sought Makepeace, to whom he made a significant sign, which that individual at once comprehended. The young nobleman then rejoined his mother-in-law and cousin; and they walked forth into the garden together.

As this was the first occasion since the disastrous incident of the summer-house that an evening ramble had been taken, or that the system of guarded conduct had been in the slightest degree deviated from, the Countess could not help thinking that Adolphus had some particular project in view: for he had found no opportunity during the day to communicate his intention to her ladyship. Isabella, on the other hand, was too artless and innocent to entertain the idea of any ulterior purpose; and leaning upon her cousin's arm, she walked by his side in silence, occupied with her own melancholy reflections. To his other arm the Countess clung; and as the night was clear and beautiful, she and her lover were now enabled to exchange glances of deep and earnest tenderness.

It becomes necessary to explain that in one of the angles of the walls enclosing the spacious garden-grounds, there was a small private door, but which was seldom or never used. An avenue of evergreens led from this door towards the conservatories at the further extremity of the garden; and it was in this avenue that Osmond was now walking with the two ladies. At first there was little conversation: for Isabella was altogether silent—while Adolphus and Ethel were too much gratified with the opportunity of thus stealthily bestowing a tender pressure of the hand, or of exchanging a fond look when the starlight penetrated amidst the trees and flooded their path with its argentine lustre, to give utterance to remarks on purely indifferent subjects: for on such subjects alone could they converse in the presence of Isabella, who was altogether unsuspicious of their guilty love.

"You are pensive, my sweet cousin?" said Adolphus, at length breaking a long silence, and now addressing himself to Isabella. "The Countess and I are not so dull," he continued in a good-humoured strain, "as to be unable to comprehend what occupies your thoughts. We both feel for you, my dear cousin——"

"Isabella has already more than once received the assurance of my sympathy," remarked the Countess.

"But we should offer her more than sympathy," quickly exclaimed Lord Osmond. "There could be no harm in assisting the progress of this little love-affair, which experiences disfavour only on the part of *one*: for really Christian Ashton is an admirable young man——You are weeping, dear Isabella!"

"The conversation gives her pain," said the Countess, in a tone of tenderest sympathy.

"Not for worlds would I wilfully give you pain, my dear cousin," resumed Adolphus. "On the contrary!—you shall see whether I have not studied to do something to afford you pleasure."

"What mean you?" inquired the agitated, the astonished, and the bewildered girl, her heart fluttering with suspense.

"I mean, my dear cousin, that here is some one whom you may perhaps be glad to meet!"

These last words were spoken just as the little party reached the end of the avenue where the private door stood; and at the same moment a key was heard to turn in the lock of that door. It opened—and a faint cry of mingled surprise and delight burst from Isabella's lips, as she beheld Christian Ashton.

"We will leave you together for half-an-hour," said Lord Osmond: and he hurried the Countess away from the spot.

Isabella, well nigh overcome by her feelings, sank half-fainting into Christian's arms: he strained her to his breast, breathing the tenderest and most endearing words in her ear. He explained to her how he had earnestly longed for one parting interview—how Lord Osmond had kindly volunteered to procure it—and how a note enclosing a key of the gate, and instructing him in what manner to proceed, had been left a few minutes back at his lodgings. Who the person was that left it, Christian did not know: but we need hardly inform the reader it was the valet Makepeace.

And were not the lovers happy? and did they not feel themselves supremely blest? Was it likely that they should yield to timid apprehensions, and on that account cut short the pure pleasure—the chaste luxury—of this interview? Or need we say that the vows of eternal love which the enraptured youth sought from the lips of the tender maiden, were murmuringly whispered—that those vows were reciprocated—and that they were ratified with the purest and holiest kisses?

They walked together in that shady avenue for nearly an hour,—Adolphus and Ethel having thus well nigh doubled the interval to which the young nobleman had in the first instance limited the meeting; and during this space everything was forgotten by the youthful pair except the happiness of being thus together. So rapidly slipped away the time, that when Adolphus and Ethel again joined them, it seemed as if the interview had lasted but for five minutes instead of fifty. It was at the extremity of the avenue which was nearest to the conservatories that the youthful lovers were thus rejoined by Lord Osmond and the Countess of Lascelles; and it was here that they now separated. Isabella, again taking her cousin's arm, accompanied him and the Countess back to the mansion in one direction—while our young hero, hastily threading his way along the shady avenue, regained the garden-gate, whence he issued,—locking it again and taking the key with him. Had not his thoughts been entirely wrapped up in the ecstatic luxury of feeling which this interview had left behind it, he would most probably have been struck by a certain strange rustling amidst the adjacent evergreens:—but as it happened, he heard it not.

Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles had retired to the library to make notes of whatsoever perilous escapes or marvellous adventures he could possibly concoct, and which were worthy of incorporation in those celebrated memoirs that were to throw Baron Munchausen into the shade. He however found his imagination more cloudy than he had expected: he rang for wine—but fresh potations appeared only to increase his dullness, instead of giving a spur to his inventive ingenuity. Thus an hour elapsed; and he had only got so far as to place himself between the fore-paws of a huge African lion, without being enabled to resolve upon the special means of his own extrication and his formidable adversary's defeat. He sate back in his chair, thinking: but gradually with his meditations there became mingled an under-current of thoughts which presently absorbed the others. This ramble in the garden assumed a suspicious aspect to his mind. He did not know what it could possibly mean; and yet he could not help thinking it meant something more than a mere stroll for the purpose of courting the evening breeze. Without entering into details in respect to the old nobleman's ideas, we may as well at once state that his misgivings reached such a pitch he tossed down the pen—left himself, so far as his memoirs were concerned, in the grasp of the lion, with a boa-constrictor picturesquely thrown in, and represented as looking down from a tree ready to spring upon them both:—and issuing from the library, he stole into the garden, treading noiselessly amongst the evergreens. He drew near that very identical arbour where he had surprised Christian and Isabella, and where he had received so smart a blow upon the nose: but all was silent there. He diverged elsewhere; and now his wandering steps brought him in the immediate vicinage of the private door. Footsteps rapidly approaching along the avenue, fell upon his ear; and just at that spot close by the door, there were no high trees to intercept the starlight. All therefore was clear; and the ancient Earl popped down behind a shrub to see who the individual was that now approached the gate. It was Christian Ashton; and in the sudden surprise with which the nobleman was thus smitten, he gave such a start as to rustle the shrub:—but Christian heard it not. The Earl tarried where he was, crouching down like a frog: he perceived our hero insert the key in the lock—open the gate—pass forth—shut it again; and then the relocking thereof fell on his lordship's ear.

"Well, am I really awake?" asked the Earl of himself: "or is this a dream? I have either discovered something extraordinary to a degree; or else I am the silliest *young* dotard that ever existed."

Bewildered and confused, the Earl wended his way back to the library—filled a bumper—tossed it off—and threw himself back in his chair to meditate. Sleep stole upon him; and he was presently awakened by the entrance of Makepeace. His first impulse was to tell the valet everything that had happened: his second thought was to hold his tongue; for the idea slipped into his head that he had drunk too much wine and had been dreaming. He inquired what o'clock it was; and was told it was past eleven. Lord Osmond and the ladies had already retired to their respective chambers; and the Earl accordingly went up to his own. On entering his dressing-room, the first thing he did was to glance at a particular nail to which the key of the private garden-door was wont to be hung:—and there, sure enough, it was. Nor need this be at all astonishing to the reader,—inasmuch as Makepeace had during the day procured a counterpart key, in accordance with instructions given by Lord Osmond, who remunerated him liberally for everything he did.

But when the Earl thus caught sight of that key, his suspicion was strengthened to the effect that he had dreamt this new incident of the garden; and as nothing would have been more galling to his mean petty vanity than to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his servant, he breathed not a syllable relative to his supposed dream. Yet when Makepeace had retired, the Earl of Lascelles reflected more and more on the occurrence; and he was haunted by the apprehension that there *might* be something more in it than a mere dream—especially as it had occurred on the very evening that the garden-ramble was renewed.

"The key is certainly here," he said to himself; "and not for a moment would Makepeace remove it from its nail. I know the fellow is fidelity itself: I am too keen and shrewd to be deceived by any man's countenance. No one could have purloined the key, because Makepeace always keeps my dressing-room locked. But it is quite possible for that young scoundrel Ashton to have had a false key made. Perhaps he came of his own accord, hoping to see Isabella. Yes—it must have been so: for Adolphus could not possibly so far forget himself as to connive at such a proceeding. Very good, Master Ashton! So you will persist in looking after my niece—will you? We'll see if we can't put a stop to it. I'm almost sorry I didn't pounce upon him: but perhaps it is all for the best. I'll go to the magistrate in the morning —or I'll set a detective to watch. But no! there's something better than that——and, by Jove! I'll do it."

Whatever this last idea might have been, it certainly seemed to tickle the silly old nobleman's fancy very much: for he rubbed his hands and chuckled—grinning most ludicrously at the same time; and putting on his night-cap with the fringe of false hair, he sought his couch.

On the following day Lord Osmond, emboldened by the success of the previous evening's adventure, called upon Christian to inform him that he might, if he thought fit, have another interview with Isabella; and our hero, who was enthusiastically devoted to the charming girl, was only too willing to accept an offer which he believed to arise from the kindest and most disinterested feeling. During this same day, too, the Earl of Lascelles had a little private conversation with the under-gardener, —giving him certain instructions, and charging him to observe the strictest secrecy. This the man faithfully promised,—all the more readily too, as the Earl slipped a couple of guineas into his hand. The old nobleman, when in the presence of the family, suffered not his countenance to betray that there was any secret scheme which he was hatching: but nevertheless he was too full of it to be enabled to settle his mind to dictate to his son; and thus the proffered services of Adolphus were dispensed with. Indeed, so far as the memoirs were concerned, the Earl continued in the grasp of the lion, and the huge boa-constrictor was still coiled round the branch of the tree, waiting to spring.

When the evening came, the Earl and Countess, Lord Osmond and Isabella, were assembled as usual in the drawing-room to take coffee; and at about half-past eight o'clock, the Earl, rising from his seat, said that he should go to the library and prepare for the next day's work, as he was positively determined to proceed with his book on the morrow.

"And as the heat has prevented you from going out all day," said Adolphus to the ladies, "I offer, like a gay gallant, to escort you for a stroll in the grounds."

The proposal was accepted: the bell was rung for the shawls; and the Earl, chuckling with inward satisfaction, exclaimed, "Well, the evening is really beautiful; and instead of shutting myself up in the library, I will take a lounge with you."

Adolphus and Ethel were enabled, from a course of dissimulation, to maintain the strictest guard over their looks at this most unexpected and ominous proposal: but Isabella turned pale and trembled. Fortunately however her countenance was not at the instant towards her uncle; and he perceived not her emotion. But the Countess did notice it; and hastening to assist Isabella with her shawl, she whispered rapidly, "Fear nothing! Adolphus will make everything right."

The Earl gave his arm to the Countess, while Lord Osmond escorted his cousin Isabella. They descended the stairs and reached the hall,—Adolphus the while racking his brain for some pretext to speak aside to Makepeace. As fortune would have it, Makepeace himself was at the instant crossing the hall, with a chamber-candle in his hand.

"With your permission, Bella," said Lord Osmond, "I will smoke a cigar in the garden. Here, Makepeace! give me a light."

The valet stopped short accordingly: Adolphus approached him; and while stooping towards the candle, he said in a low rapid whisper, "Hasten round and prevent young Ashton from entering by the gate this evening."

The cigar was lighted—Adolphus gave Isabella his arm again—and the party issued forth. The Earl was determined that Adolphus and Isabella should not wander away from himself and the Countess; and therefore, on entering the garden, he kept his son in continued conversation. But Lord Osmond had really no intention of straying: he had provided against the entrance of Christian Ashton—and that was the only thing he cared for. He fancied that there must be some suspicion in his father's mind: but what its precise nature was, he could not conjecture. As for the Earl, he was naturally led to imagine that this repetition of the evening walk might be in connexion with an expected visit from Christian; and that, after all, Adolphus *was* really favouring the discarded secretary's suit towards Miss Vincent. The Earl however chatted gaily, as if there were nothing to disturb his humour,—and all the more gaily, too, because he inwardly chuckled at the hope of wreaking a speedy vengeance on the presumptuous youth who dared aspire to the hand of his niece and stealthily intrude upon his grounds.

Meantime Makepeace, in pursuance of Lord Osmond's hint, had issued from the principal entrance of the grounds; and rapidly skirting the wall he reached the private door, against which he planted himself to await the coming of Christian Ashton. While standing there, he caught the sounds of heavy footsteps moving about just inside the garden door: then he heard a strange grating noise, as of some iron mechanism being acted upon; and this was followed by a sharp click—while a voice just audible to the valet's ears, muttered, "Botheration take this cursed thing! Ah, that's right at last!"

This latter ejaculation was accompanied by another grating metallic noise; and then the footsteps moved away from the neighbourhood of the door. The words were spoken in so low a tone—being merely in a musing strain to the man's own self—that Makepeace could not recognise who he was; and he was totally at a loss to comprehend what the proceeding meant. He had not however much time for reflection ere our young hero made his appearance; and on beholding Makepeace planted against the door, he instantaneously fancied there was something wrong.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Ashton," said the valet: "I am here to befriend you. You must not enter the garden this evening: Lord Osmond bade me come hither to warn you against it."

"For heaven's sake tell me," exclaimed Christian, "whether anything——" and then he abruptly stopped short, fearing lest the valet was acting as the Earl's spy.

"Do not be afraid of me, Mr. Ashton," continued Makepeace: "I am secretly disposed in your favour. The best proof is that it was I who procured the duplicate key for you, and left it with Lord Osmond's note at your lodgings yesterday. I can full well understand the reason you are not to enter the grounds this evening: it is simply because the Earl has taken it into his head to join the party in their walk."

"Thank you for this assurance!" replied Christian, his mind now infinitely relieved: for his first and very natural misgiving was that Isabella might have become involved in fresh trouble on his account.

He then bade Makepeace "good night," and returned to his lodging,—much disappointed however at not being enabled to meet Isabella. Makepeace hastily re-entered the grounds, and at once proceeded to the spot just inside the garden-gate where he had heard the footsteps, the muttered ejaculations, and the grating metallic sounds, which had so much perplexed him. At first, he could see nothing: but a closer scrutiny showed him a man-trap, with its teethed jaws wide apart, ready to receive and to close upon any unfortunate leg that might step between. Indeed the valet's own leg experienced but a narrow escape from being caught therein, as he was searching about upon the spot.

"This is extraordinary!" thought Makepeace to himself: but his knowledge of the Earl's character speedily made him aware that it was a device of that nobleman's fertile brain. "It is pretty clear that the old man suspects or knows something: but how the deuce could it have come to his knowledge? At all events *I* am not suspected: for his lordship was as kind to me to-day as ever—and I know the old bird too well to be deceived by such kindness if it were not perfectly natural. The cunning dog!—he thought he would keep this entirely to himself. He expects to catch young Ashton; and he will come here presently to see whether his victim is fast in the trap."

Makepeace was strolling away from the gate, when a mischievous idea struck him.

"Wouldn't he be astonished," thought the valet to himself, "if he came and found no trap at all? He would fancy that Christian had been caught, and had climbed over the wall, dragging the trap with him. Capital! I'll hide it!"

So Makepeace, carefully lifting the machine in such a way as to avoid getting his arms between its gaping jaws, carried the trap to some little distance, and deposited it amongst a group of shrubs,—having done which he re-entered the mansion.

In the meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles and his wife, Adolphus and Isabella, had been rambling about the gardens: but the Earl took good care to keep them at a tolerable distance from the private door. Thus an hour passed; and then he proposed to return into the house. But on passing in-doors, the old nobleman made some excuse to leave them; and he hastened back into the garden.

"Ah, my young friend!" he said within himself, thus apostrophising Christian Ashton, "I shall find you caught in the trap as sure as a gun! —but like a true lover of romance, you have too much pluck to roar out and thus betray everything. Or perhaps you have managed to extricate yourself,—in which case the teeth will show whether they bit home. But I am more inclined to think I shall find you pinned fast there,—enjoying a miserable martyrdom."

In his haste to ascertain the result of an idea which he conceived to be one of the most brilliant that had ever entered his fertile brain, the Earl of Lascelles did not pursue the tedious meanderings of the gravel-walk which led towards the private door: but he cut across the grass-plat—reached the evergreens—and began working his way manfully amongst them. But all of a sudden a terrific yell rang through the grounds; for, lo and behold! the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles was caught in his own trap.

Nothing could exceed the horrible cries and the piteous lamentations which kept coming from the lips of the wretched old man. Lord Adolphus and some of the men-servants rushed forth from the mansion: others followed with lights; and guided by the Earl's yells, they speedily reached the spot where he was pinned fast. Lord Adolphus was most painfully afflicted on beholding his father in a plight so unaccountable, but which for any one except a son would have had something so exceedingly ludicrous in it. Indeed, several of the servants turned aside to laugh outright; and Makepeace could scarcely keep his countenance. The old lord was extricated from the trap and borne into the house: but on arriving there, he would not suffer any one to attend him in his dressing-room except Makepeace. The Countess and Isabella, having retired to their own apartments to put off their shawls, had not heard the cries; and when they were informed of what had happened, they sped to the door of the Earl's suite of rooms to make inquiries and render any needful assistance. But Makepeace, opening the door a few inches, assured them that his lordship was by no means seriously hurt—that he desired to be left alone—and that they were on no account to send for medical assistance.

It was quite true that the old nobleman was not much injured—for the simple reason that the calf of his leg had been protected by a pretty considerable piece of padding, which was artistically fixed inside his stocking so as to give that appearance of modelled robustness which nature had denied to those spindle-shanks. And it was likewise on account of this succedaneous arrangement that the Earl would not suffer any one to enter his dressing-room except Makepeace.

CHAPTER LI.

A REVELATION.

THE incident of the man-trap remained enveloped in a considerable degree of mystery with the generality of the Earl's household. His lordship said, as if in a cursory manner, that he supposed one of the gardeners must have set it under the impression that there were nocturnal intruders upon the grounds; and he forbade any inquiries to be instituted. Makepeace of course took very good care not to confess how far he had been instrumental in producing the ignoble catastrophe: nor did he think fit to mention the circumstance even to Lord Osmond. The under-gardener likewise maintained the secret, in pursuance of the instructions he had received from the Earl: but the man could not for the life of him conceive how the trap had become moved from its original position.

When, at the expiration of a day or two, the nobleman was enabled to leave his room again, he took an opportunity of questioning the under-gardener: and though the fellow swore lustily he had planted the trap against the private door, the Earl could not help thinking the fellow had got drunk and had placed it amongst the shrubs. However, he was content to leave the matter as it stood: for he had no inclination to make a disturbance relative to an incident that was so painfully humiliating for himself. Yet bitter was his lordship's vexation that Christian Ashton should have escaped him: for it was his intention, if the youth had been caught in the trap, to summon the whole household to witness him in that position. The tables had however been turned: it was the Earl himself who was caught—the Earl himself likewise whom that household, with but three or four exceptions, had poured forth to see.

The incident produced the most painful impression upon the minds of the Countess, Adolphus, and Isabella. Without being at all enabled to account for it, they were nevertheless deeply saddened by the thought that the poor old nobleman had been placed in that cruel predicament. Such a state of feeling brings vividly up into people's minds the wrongs of which they have been guilty, or the duties which they have violated, in respect to the individual who is the object of their compassion. The Countess, who had many generous qualities notwithstanding the deep depravity into which an irresistible temptation had led her, was more than ever aroused to the blackness of her turpitude: while Lord Osmond, despite his unabating infatuation for his young and beautiful mother-in-law, could no longer look in his father's face without feeling that his guilt towards that parent was of the darkest and deepest dye. As for Isabella,—she, with her feelings far more keenly sensitive, and with her notions of propriety still more exquisitely delicate, was led painfully to reflect that as her uncle stood in the light of a parent, she had proved grievously disobedient to his wishes in stealthily meeting Christian Ashton.

The result of all these remorseful feelings was that the Countess of Lascelles penned a note to Adolphus, beseeching and imploring that on some pretext he would withdraw from the mansion, and that by means of a long separation they might better endeavour to conquer their unhappy passion. She appeared to recover much if not all of that firmness of purpose which had at first stood her in such good stead, and enabled her to struggle for a time against the wiles of temptation. Adolphus—though feeling it was despair, if not death, to sever himself from the adored and worshipped Ethel—was nevertheless led by a sense of duty to make this atonement for his sin—however tardy, and however slight in comparison with the sin itself; and in a note penned in response to that of the Countess, he assured her that he would lose no time in stating to his father that he intended to travel upon the Continent.

As for Isabella,—she likewise penned a note; and it was to Christian Ashton. In terms of suitable maiden modesty—but still properly tender and affectionate after all that had passed between them—she besought him not to make any further attempts to see her until she could receive his visits with her uncle's full concurrence. She assured him that never would she prove faithless to the troth that she had pledged—and that if it were written in the book of destiny that they were not born for each other, yet that never would she bestow her hand where her heart was not likewise given. Thus the letter—though containing a *fiat* of complete severance for the present, and heaven alone could tell for how long a period—was nevertheless precisely such an one as became a young lady of the strictest purity of principle, and which a right-minded youth such as Christian Ashton could not possibly regard without feeling that it raised her more highly than ever in his estimation.

In pursuance of the solemn promise given to the Countess of Lascelles, and of that sense of duty to which he was awakened, Lord Osmond sought an opportunity of conversing alone with the Earl. This was a few days after the incidents related in the previous chapter; and the interview took place in the library.

"My dear father," began Adolphus, "I come to request your permission for my temporary absence from home."

"Well, it's very proper in you to request my permission," responded the Earl: "there is nothing like obedience. I think I have often told you that I was a very obedient son. Indeed, it was one of my virtues. I recollect that I never ventured on the ice after my dear father, the late Earl, ordered me to keep off it——which, by the bye, was on the occasion when I fell through and was so nearly drowned that I was six hours in a state of suspended animation. But about this absence of your's—where are you going to?"

"I purpose, my dear father, to travel on the Continent for a year or two——"

"There is certainly nothing like travelling," remarked the Earl; "as indeed my book will show when it is published. I question however if you will pick up enough in Europe to fill two large volumes: for travels are nothing at all without lions, and bears, and crocodiles, and snakes. Why, would you believe it, the moment Mr. Bentley, the publisher——he is Publisher in Ordinary to her Majesty, you know, although I certainly never had the honour of meeting with any book bearing her Majesty's name on the title page——However, as I was about to state, the moment Mr. Bentley advertised '*a forthcoming work of travels by the Right Honourable the Earl of Lascelles*',—although, by the bye, there was not a line written at the time—I was waited upon by an old gentleman who offered me his literary assistance. I asked him for his qualifications; and I think he said he had written three voyages to the North Pole, eleven round the world, six travels in China, three into the heart of Africa, four to the Rocky Mountains, and about fifty others to different parts of the earth, including six or seven ascents up Mont Blanc, and about seventeen shipwrecks."

"But my dear father," exclaimed Adolphus, "this man was an impostor! A little calculation would show that a dozen lives would not suffice for so much travelling and voyaging."

"God bless your soul!" cried the Earl, "the worthy gentleman had never been out of England in his life: or else how could he possibly have found time to write the books at all? They were all composed at the British Museum, and published under an infinite variety of names and titles. Why, this good gentleman who came to me, as I am telling you, was a Colonial Bishop—an Officer in the East India Company's Service—a Subaltern Unattached—an Old Naval Officer—a Lady of Rank—an Oxonian—an Etonian—a Missionary to the South Sea Islands—a Trader to Hudson's Bay—and heaven only knows what! But you will fancy the answer I gave him. Of course I told him that the Earl of Lascelles did not want a hodge-podge dished up for him—but that they were my own personal experiences, adventures, and impressions that I was about to give to the world. I only mention all this to let you see that if you *do* travel, you could easily have a book confectioned for you on your return."

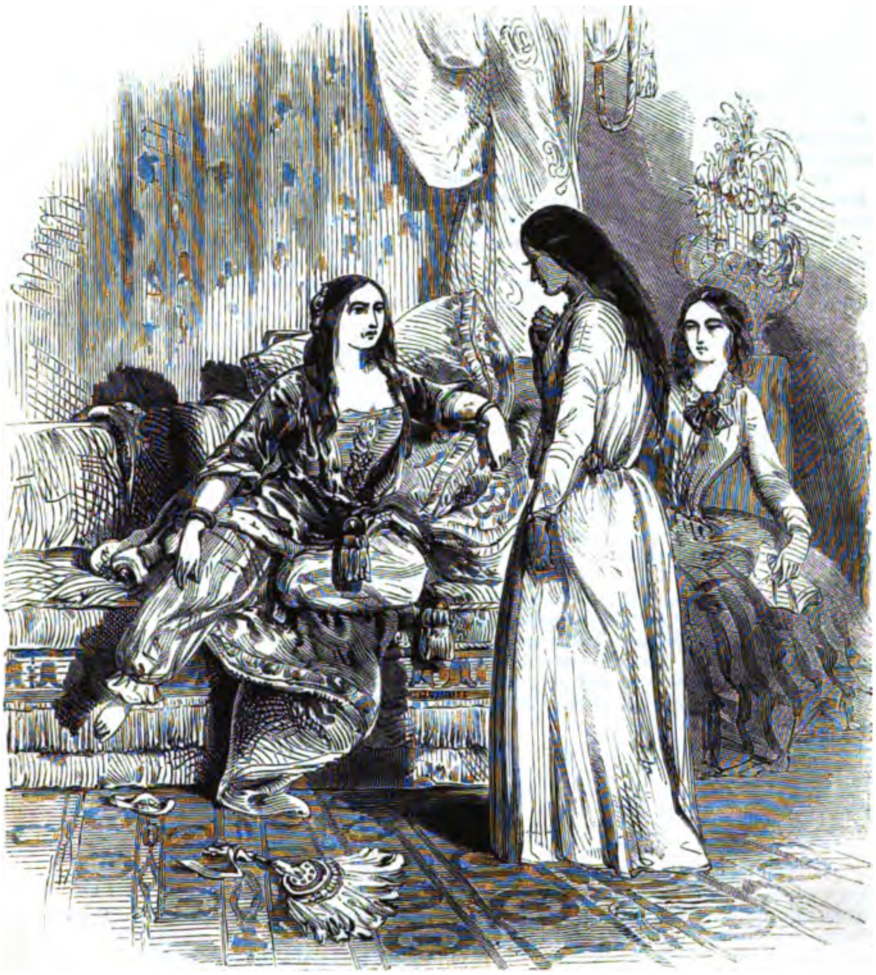
"But, my dear father, I do not want to write a book," replied Lord Osmond,—"much less to have one written for me."

"Well, well—every one to his taste!" said the Earl, complacently stroking his wrinkled chin, as much as to imply that it was *his* taste, and his pride too, to become an illustrious ornament of the literary world. "However," he continued, "I have not the slightest objection that you should take a tour on the Continent during your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon?" ejaculated Adolphus, in a sort of dismayed amazement—but rather at the unexpected mention of such words than because he was at a loss to comprehend them; for, on the contrary, he could not help at once suspecting at what the Earl was driving.

"To be sure—the honeymoon!" repeated his lordship, staring fixedly in the young nobleman's countenance. "And it is a very odd thing that at the moment you entered the library I was about to send for you. But there are strange coincidences at times. I remember once when I was at Eton, I was just going to take up a big stone to shy at a boy's head, when he picked up one and suddenly threw it at me with such force he nearly knocked my eye out. But as I was about to say, I was just on the point of sending for you, Adolphus, to have a very serious conversation with you. In a word, you must marry Isabella off-hand; and we'll fix this day week for the nuptials."

"But, my dear father," cried Lord Osmond, "this is impossible!"



"Impossible! What—to marry a pretty girl? Egad! I never found it impossible."

"But there is no love subsisting between us!" responded Lord Osmond.

"Love will come of its own accord. It's a deuce of a thing for springing up spontaneously."

"But I feel that I shall never entertain any other sentiment than that of friendship for my cousin. Besides," added Adolphus hesitatingly, "her own affections are already disposed of——"

"What! to that whipper-snapper who had the impertinence to bruise the nose of a Peer of England?" exclaimed the Earl, rubbing the proboscis thus alluded to, as if it still smarted with the pain: "the impertinent scoundrel on whose account I was caught——" the Earl was just on the point of adding "in a trap:" but quickly amending the idea, he said, "so nicely at the entry of that summer-house."

"It is perfectly true, my dear father," replied Adolphus, who was too much abstracted to notice the peculiarity with which the Earl's last words were uttered,—"it is perfectly true that Christian Ashton is the object of Isabella's affections; and really, with all due deference, you can only blame yourself for having introduced him to your table and thus thrown them so much together. There is no denying that he is a very prepossessing, intellectual, and agreeable young man; and it was not therefore astonishing——"

"Nevertheless," interrupted the Earl, somewhat severely—for he by no means liked to be reminded of the unexpected and unintended turn which his previous stratagem had taken when he introduced Christian into the bosom of his family, —"nevertheless you shall marry Isabella. I have made up my mind upon the point; and when once I am resolved upon a thing, it is as good as done."

"My dear father," answered Lord Osmond,

very seriously, "it is impossible I can take as a wife a young lady whose affections are engaged to another. It would be indelicate—cruel——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the Earl, vehemently. "I tell you it is already as good as settled!"

"Not exactly so," rejoined Adolphus, with a firmness that was almost indignant: "for you have yet to obtain the consent of the two principal persons."

"Isabella will yield to my wishes," said the Earl: "indeed she *must*—she is dependent upon me——that is to say, she believes herself so——"

"And is she not?" inquired Adolphus, with astonishment.

"Never mind!" rejoined the Earl tartly. "I tell you she will assent—and I reckon upon your compliance likewise."

"Deceive yourself not for a moment, my dear father," said Adolphus: "I cannot—I will not marry my cousin Isabella!"

"And I say you *can* and you *shall!*" rejoined the Earl: and he spoke with a decisiveness that appeared to have something more in it than a mere whim or caprice.

"I see that this interview had better terminate at once," said Adolphus coldly: and he was rising from his seat, when he was struck by the imperious gesture with which the Earl bade him retain it.

"Now, understand me well, Adolphus," continued the old nobleman; "I have set my mind on this match for more reasons than one—and I intend it to take place. You had better yield with a good countenance—or you will compel me to make revelations which will perhaps somewhat startle you."

These ambiguous words instantaneously associated themselves in Lord Osmond's mind with those former ones in reference to Isabella which had struck him as peculiar; and knowing how for some years—ever since the death of her mother—the Earl had kept her in such privacy that neither he nor the Countess had the slightest idea where she was until she was suddenly brought home in the manner already described,—a painful suspicion in respect to his father's integrity arose in the young nobleman's mind.

"Is it possible," he asked, in a low and trembling voice, "that you have acted wrongfully towards that orphan daughter of your deceased sister?"

"What! do you think I have robbed her out of a fortune," ejaculated the Earl sneeringly, "when she never had a penny-piece of her own? Not I indeed! I never robbed anybody in my life—not so much as an umbrella from a friend: and umbrellas, you know, have ever been considered legitimate plunder."

"Then what revelations are these to which you so ambiguously refer?" inquired Adolphus, bewildered what to think.

"You had better not ask me," responded the Earl; "but like a good fellow, marry Isabella off hand. We'll have a sumptuous wedding; and I tell you what——yes I positively will!——I'll have it down at the Bloomfield estate—all the tenantry shall be invited—we'll have jumping in sacks, climbing up greasy poles, eating treacle-biscuits, and catching pigs with soapy tails. Unless indeed you prefer to have the wedding here——"

"My dear father," interrupted Adolphus, "once for all do let me beseech you to explain the grave and important reasons which you seem to have for wishing these nuptials to take place."

"Well, if you are obstinate," said the Earl, "the truth must be told:"—but he screwed up his face with the air of a man who had the prospect of no very agreeable task to perform.

"What on earth can it be?" demanded Adolphus, full of suspense: and yet this suspense was far from being so poignant as it would have been if he had a less frivolous and more stable-minded person to deal with.

"Look you, Adolphus!" resumed the Earl: "suppose that by any accident all my estates at my death should pass away to your cousin Isabella?"

"But, father, this is supposing an impossibility——unless I myself were also dead; for of course I am aware that the entail descends upon the females as well as upon the males of the family."

"And why is it supposing an impossibility?" demanded the old Earl. "There is nothing impossible—as I fully proved when I rode the wild elephant in Africa."

Adolphus gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience.

"You wilful dog!" growled the old Earl; "you persevere in forcing me to tell you everything. Suppose, then—only suppose, I say—that some sudden exposure took place—and it became proved that you——But come! marry the girl and have done with it!"

"Father, you must speak out!" exclaimed Lord Osmond, now much excited, and with a suspense that was really poignant. "For heaven's sake tell me what you mean!"

"I mean, Adolphus," replied the Earl, himself considerably excited and painfully bewildered, "that though I have no doubt you are the son of your father and mother—nevertheless your father isn't your father and your mother wasn't your mother."

Adolphus gazed upon the Earl as if he thought he was going mad: and yet even from that strange conglomeration of absurd contradictions and ridiculous paradoxes, there seemed to be a certain idea to be eliminated—a startling deduction to be made. Adolphus was frightened: a cold shiver, like a presentiment of evil, ran through him: he essayed to speak—but vainly gasped for utterance.

"There is no harm in it if you marry the girl," continued the old nobleman; "and the world need never be the wiser—at least I hope not. For even if the truth did some day transpire, you could but lose the title—you would have all the estates by right of your wife, to whom they would devolve by entail."

Adolphus sate upon his chair as if he were in the midst of a dream. All the words which the Earl had just uttered appeared to confirm the wild—the startling—the almost impossible idea which his former incoherent speech had conjured up. The colour forsook the young man's countenance: he felt as if he were about to faint:—there was fortunately a decanter of water upon the table: he filled a glass and drank a long draught.

"You are saying all this to coerce me into a marriage with my cousin!" he exclaimed, clutching with avidity at the thought.

"Isabella is no more your cousin, Adolphus," responded the old nobleman, "than I am your father——and I am *not!*" he added emphatically.

Adolphus raised his hands to his throbbing brows as if to steady his wildly agitated thoughts: his brain seemed to whirl in confusion. Could it possibly be true? Was he an unwilling impostor? had he lived thus long an animated lie without knowing it? had he for twenty-four years passed in the world as a breathing falsehood, though utterly guiltless of wanton deceit? Oh, if it were so, he felt as if he could not survive it—'twere a blow too terrible to bear!

The old Earl had no such depth of feeling; and though he was to a certain degree excited and distressed, yet it was only to a degree, and not nearly to the same extent as the unhappy—the miserable—the soul-crushed Adolphus. Yet all in a moment there sprang up in the young man's heart a sense of consolation—yes, *consolation* in the midst of such overwhelming revelations as these. If he were not the Earl's son, his crime in respect to her whom he had hitherto looked upon as his mother-in-law became in a moment many, many shades lighter to contemplate, dark though its hue still remained.

"Tell me how all this happened!—explain it!" he said, with quick and excited utterance: "for heaven's sake keep me not another moment in suspense!"

"Listen then," said the Earl, speaking with less silliness and flippancy than was his wont. "It was at Bloomfield that I was residing with my first wife when a son and heir was born twenty-four years and a half ago. A few days after that birth, important business hurried me away to the Continent; and the serious embarrassments in which a near relation, who is long since dead, had involved himself at Vienna, detained me there for a period of four months. When I returned to England my wife was in a northern county, on a visit to some relations there: and indeed, as letters had previously informed me, I was assured that it was for the sake of her health that she had removed thither. I rejoined her: the child whom she represented to me as my son, was healthy and thriving. Years passed on—and you know with what kindness you were treated by her who passed as your mother, and indeed from whose bosom you were nourished in your infancy. You are aware likewise that she was of the Catholic persuasion and that she was attended by a priest in her last hours, when a mortal illness overtook her beneath this roof. To that priest she confessed everything: but he dared not give her absolution *unless she* revealed to me the fraud which had been perpetrated."

"Go on," groaned Adolphus in a half-stifling voice.

"The revelation was made accordingly," continued the Earl: "but I swore to the Countess—your mother of adoption—that I would continue to treat you as my son and never expose the fraud to the world. She died with a conscience much *relieved*——she died blessing me," added the old nobleman, now displaying deeper feeling than Adolphus had ever before seen him exhibit.

"And why that fraud?" asked the young man, still profoundly agitated.

"I have already told you that I was abruptly called away from England when my child was three days old. A month afterwards that child died. There were circumstances attending its birth—circumstances so painful to its mother, as to preclude the idea that she could ever again hope to become a parent. She dreaded lest the severance of the tie which that child's existence constituted betwixt herself and me should alienate my heart from her, and make me look upon her even with aversion as a wife who could give no heir to the haughty name of Lascelles. She knew moreover that if anything happened to me, the estates would devolve upon my sister—Isabella's mother,—and that she herself (my wife, I mean) would have to retire upon a small jointure, almost excluded as it were from that family of which it was her pride to be one of the heads. All these reasons induced her to practise the cheat which I have described. Opportunities were favourable: I was absent, with a certainty of remaining away for yet some months—she had a surgeon and a nurse accessible to bribery—female dependants who were devoted to her—and I had left her with the illimitable command of funds. You understand the rest—I need say no more."

"Yes, there is something more for you to tell me!" answered Adolphus: then, after a pause, he said—and the words appeared to half choke him,—"Whose son am I?"

"A poor family's who resided in some midland county which my wife traversed on her way to her friends in the north. This family, being heavily bribed, departed at once for America,—such immediate removal to a foreign clime being the paramount condition of the compact. They have never since been heard of: but still, as I just now said, there is always the possibility, if not the probability of some of them turning up——"

"And the name of this family?" said Adolphus, quickly.

"I do not know it," replied the Earl: "and I can give the most satisfactory reason in the world—which is, that I never knew it. Even if the late Countess intended to mention it, she did not—which is just the same thing as if she had never meant to tell me at all."

The old nobleman, having spoken in a serious and deliberate manner for some time, was now relapsing into his wonted frivolity,—which only served to aggravate the bitterness of feelings experienced by the wretched Adolphus. The latter began to pace the library in an agitated manner; and vainly did he essay to collect his thoughts sufficiently for calm deliberation. It was a fearful blow which had struck him; and though the truth had been revealed slowly by his putative father, the effect was nevertheless as if it had smitten him with a most cruel abruptness. As we have already said, the only glimmer of light which penetrated into the darkness of his mind, arose from the fact that his amour with Ethel had ceased to wear an incestuous aspect. But on the other hand, in what a position stood he? At any moment an accident might unmask him: some unforeseen circumstance might suddenly transpire to prove to the whole world that instead of being the rightful heir to the Earldom and estates of Lascelles, he was in reality an interloper in the family.

"Now I suppose, Adolphus," said the Earl, accosting him, "you will consent to marry your cousin Isabel—and I will ring the bell at once to let her know she is to send for the milliner and order the wedding-dress."

"No, no—for heaven's sake act not thus precipitately!" exclaimed Adolphus. "At least give me four-and-twenty hours to reflect!"

"Four-and-twenty hours to reflect!" ejaculated the old nobleman. "Why, I never reflected for four-and-twenty hours running in all my life!"

"It is impossible to come to an immediate decision!" rejoined Adolphus impatiently. "My feelings are so disturbed—my mind is so cruelly agitated——I beseech you, press me not now—but at this hour to-morrow——"

"Well, well—I see that I must humour you," said the old nobleman: "and it is natural enough you should be annoyed and excited to learn that you are not your father's son! But mind! to-morrow we shall set to work in good earnest to hurry on this bridal."

Adolphus made no response—but hastened from the room. He retired to his own chamber, and there gave way to his reflections. An hour did he thus remain in the companionship of those thoughts; and at the expiration of that interval, his mind appeared to be made up to some particular course. Descending to the drawing-room, he found the Countess and Isabella seated together; and the former was at once struck by the strangeness of his looks. He inquired where the Earl was—and learnt that he had gone out in the carriage for an hour or two. Adolphus then made a sign for the Countess to escape from Isabella's society, or get rid of her for a little while, on some pretext; and Ethel was therefore still further convinced that there was something exceedingly wrong. It was by no means difficult for Lady Lascelles to quit the apartment without exciting a suspicion on the part of the unsophisticated Isabella; and Adolphus speedily followed her.

They were now alone together in another sitting-room; and Ethel immediately said, "For heaven's sake, Adolphus, relieve me from suspense! What has happened?—has the Earl discovered everything? is my deep, deep guilt known to him?"

"No, Ethel," was the young man's response: "and you are not so deeply guilty as you have hitherto believed yourself! A strange and terrible revelation has been made to me——In a word, I am not the Earl's son!"

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment experienced by Ethel on receiving this announcement: but the first thought that struck her as that feeling of amazement subsided, was that the brain of Adolphus had become unsettled. When however he circumstantially detailed to her all that had passed between himself and the Earl of Lascelles, she perceived that it was indeed the truth which he was telling her, and that he spoke rationally and sensibly. She then recollected that the old Earl—when, in an exceeding uxorious mood, instituting comparisons to her face between herself and his former Countess—especially too when he was under the influence of wine—had more than once dropped a hint of some strange deception which that deceased wife of his had practised towards him: but from motives of delicacy Ethel had never pressed any inquiry on the point—and the Earl himself had never gone beyond the vague hints just alluded to. Now, however everything was explained; and in those very hints themselves the Countess beheld a confirmation of the startling and wondrous tale which Adolphus had just related. She sate gazing upon him with illimitable love and compassion in her looks: the better feelings which had prompted her to write him the note so strenuously urging separation, were all absorbed in the profound pity she experienced for him;—and the excitement of so much sympathy could not do otherwise than resuscitate all the ardour of her passion. Perhaps, too, the knowledge that this passion had suddenly ceased to wear the doubly dark aspect it had previously borne to her contemplation, was another strong reason wherefore her deep and devoted love should thus revive. Yes—she sate gazing upon him with looks of fondness and sympathy: but she spoke not—she knew not what words to say.

"Ethel," at length said Adolphus, breaking this long silence, "after everything that has taken place between us, I could not settle my mind to any specific course without first consulting you."

"I know not how to advise you, Adolphus," answered the Countess. "I am as much bewildered as, heaven knows, you yourself must be!"

"To-morrow at mid-day," said the young man, with a species of desperation in his looks, "I must notify my decision to the Earl."

"And that decision," said Ethel in a low soft voice, but with the glitter of anxiety in her eyes,—"what will it be?"

"I see that you yourself feel," responded Adolphus, "that I have but one course to adopt—that there is no alternative but to yield to the Earl's wishes."

A low shriek—or rather half-stifled scream burst from the lips of Ethel at these words evidently so altogether unexpected by her; and Adolphus, with a sudden start, contemplated her in mingled surprise and terror.

"No—never, never, Adolphus!" she exclaimed, springing up from her chair, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing with an almost frenzied excitement. "What! *you* marry Isabella? No, no!—I could not live to behold you another's!——But perhaps you have never loved me?"—and as the thought smote her with a sudden anguish, she sank down again upon the chair weeping bitterly.

"Ethel, dearest Ethel!" exclaimed the young man, throwing himself at her feet, seizing both her hands, and pressing them in fervour to his lips; "you know that I love you——dearly—devotedly—madly love you! Wherefore, then, this cruel suspicion? Ah, think you that if I loved you not as much as my lips proclaim, I should have been enabled to stifle all good feelings in my heart at the time when I believed it was my own father's wife——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Ethel hysterically: and then with a sudden solemnity of look and manner, she added in a low tone, "At all events we are rescued from that deep sense of stupendous guilt!"

"Tell me what you would have me do, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus; "and your slightest word shall become the strongest law for me. But remember, dear Ethel, my position is not merely a painful one—it is absolutely frightful!"

"I know—I know it!" exclaimed the Countess, again speaking with a kind of hysterical frenzy; "and therefore it is impossible for me to advise you. Do what you will: but if your position be frightful, mine is almost desperate—and sooner than behold you compelled to lead another to the altar——"

She stopped short; and Adolphus was terrified by the strange wild look of mingled frenzy and despair which for a few moments seemed stamped upon her countenance.

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" he exclaimed, starting up from his kneeling position at her feet, and beginning to pace the room with agitated and uneven steps. "I feel as if I were going mad!"

"And I," cried the Countess in a thrilling voice, "feel as if I were mad already! Oh, why did I ever love you as I have done?—wherefore do I love you so passionately still?"

"Ethel, let us endeavour to be composed and reasonable," said Adolphus, at length resuming his seat by her side, and taking her hand as he looked with fond earnestness and imploring entreaty in her face. "I tell you that I neither *will* nor *can* take any step without your consent:—but will you calmly envisage all the difficulties of the position in which I know we are placed?"

"Yes, yes—proceed!" said the Countess. "I am calm—I am reasonable!"—and yet she shivered visibly as if with a cold inward desperation.

"Would you, Ethel, that we should fly away together?" asked Adolphus. "No—I am sure you would not: for it would be ruin for us both. The Earl in his rage would proclaim everything in respect to myself: I should become an outcast—penniless; and though God knows I shrink not from the idea of poverty on my own account, yet for your sake, Ethel—Oh, I could not endure to behold you, my beloved one, pining away in want!"

"Think not of me," answered the Countess; "for I could dare everything. But not for worlds would I have your true position proclaimed!—not for worlds would I have you stripped of your rank—scorned and spurned by those who have hitherto been your equals——No, no—I could not—it would kill me!"

"You see, Ethel," continued Adolphus, "that what I said is right—and we cannot flee away together. But on the other hand I cannot remain here in the same position as before: the Earl insists that I should marry Isabella. Neither can I carry out our original view and go abroad upon the Continent: because there again arises the consideration that the Earl insists that I shall espouse Isabella!"

"In a word, then," rejoined the Countess, speaking in a voice of cold and unnatural calmness, "your position is reduced to these alternatives—that you must either fly away with me, or remain to espouse Isabella. We have both agreed that the first of these alternatives is impossible; and I see therefore that you are endeavouring to make up your mind to the latter. Is it not so?"

"In the name of heaven, Ethel, what else can I do?" asked Adolphus, with passionate vehemence.

"And Isabella, who loves Christian Ashton?" said the Countess, still in the same voice as before.

"Did you ever for a moment fancy that this childish passion of theirs," exclaimed Adolphus, "would eventually come to anything? It was all very well that you and I availed ourselves of it for our own purposes: but could we in sober seriousness conceive that an Earl's niece would be allowed to throw herself away upon this penniless youth?"

"And you could level your mind to the acceptance of a bride whose love you know to be bestowed upon another—and which very love you yourself have helped to fan?"

"Ethel, you are cruel—too cruel! you are goading me to desperation!"—and again Adolphus started up from his seat in a wild and excited manner. "Will you tell me," he demanded, after two or three rapid pacings to and fro,—"will you tell me, Ethel, what course I am to pursue?—for as there is a heaven above me, I see but one!"

"Pursue it then," said the Countess: "pursue it, Adolphus——and may you be happy. But I—but I——"

"Oh! now you fill me with wretchedness again!"—and the young man literally wrung his hands in anguish.

"No, no—be not unhappy," responded the Countess: and there was still an unnatural coldness in her look. "It is useless, Adolphus, to continue this scene: it is most painful for us both."

"Then, by heaven," ejaculated the young man, vehemently, "I will *not* marry Isabella! I will take some step—indeed I will do the very worst, rather than seal the unhappiness of your life!"

"And I, Adolphus, would do the very worst also," rejoined the Countess, "rather than live to behold you the husband of another!"

Having thus spoken, Ethel abruptly quitted the room: and Adolphus continued to walk to and fro—but no longer in an agitated manner: it was with slow pace, sombre countenance, and downcast looks.

CHAPTER LII.

THE DEED OF A NIGHT.

ADOLPHUS and Ethel did not meet again until the evening; and this was at the dinner-table, where the Earl and Isabella were present. But it would almost seem as if they had by tacit consent composed their looks in such a manner that not even to each other should there linger the slightest trace to remind them of the painful scene which had occurred a few hours back. The Earl, as a matter of course, suspected not for an instant that Adolphus had acquainted Ethel with the astounding revelation in respect to his birth; and it was naturally Ethel's policy and purpose to prevent her husband from surmising that any such revelation had been made to her. It is therefore easy to understand why she compelled herself to converse and smile as gaily as heretofore, and to wear a look as if she were labouring under no restraint. In the same way it was the policy as well as purpose of

Adolphus to maintain his usual demeanour, so that the Earl might believe him anxious to avoid the risk of showing the ladies by his looks that anything extraordinary had taken place. As for Isabella,—she was inwardly sad at having been compelled by a sense of duty to pen that note to Christian Ashton to which we have already alluded; and not being versed in the arts of dissimulation, she could not outwardly conceal this mournful pensiveness.

The dinner passed away; and when the ladies retired to the drawing-room, the Earl accompanied them,—not from any particular motive, but merely because on this occasion he had no inclination to sit over his wine. Adolphus went out to take a short ramble by himself: for he again felt the necessity of giving way to his reflections. Thus the evening passed without Adolphus and Ethel being left alone together even for a single instant.

We must observe, for the better comprehension of what is to follow, that the Countess of Lascelles still slept apart from her husband; and though the Earl was becoming impatient of this separation of chambers, he had not as yet insisted that it should cease.

Night came: silence prevailed throughout the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. Were all sleeping there? Who can say? When the world retire to rest in the evening, they know not what may transpire during the many hours of darkness ere they awaken to the light again. And during those hours what deeds of mystery and horror are often perpetrated! Wherefore to the timid-minded is night more or less terrible, even though their own consciences be without reproach? It is because they know that crime chooses the hour of darkness wherein to achieve its purpose: they know that guilt shrouds itself beneath that sombre veil when creeping stealthily along its path of iniquity. They know that if their intelligence can divest night of its superstitious terrors, yet that nevertheless real objects of horror are stalking abroad, and that the votaries of crime constitute frightful shapes. They know that murder, and burglary, and violence of every description are fearfully personified during the hours of darkness; and that the breeze which sighs or that the wind which howls around their dwellings, may be wafting the last low moan or else the loud cry of the murdered victim's agony. Yes—night has its terrors: it is peopled with fearful shapes;—and the dark passions of man accomplish all this!

The night passed—and morning dawned upon the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. It was a beautiful day to which that night had thus given birth: the beams of the orient sun shone upon the emerald verdure of the gardens, and made the fruitage glow as if gems were appended to every bough. The birds were carolling in the trees: window after window on the domestics' storey was opened to admit the breeze of morn, as the occupants of those rooms rose from their couches to apparel themselves for the work of another day. And now a little later, as eight o'clock approached, the casements of other chambers were opened,—Isabella's here—that of Adolphus there—and Ethel's on the ground-floor. The draperies fluttered gently to that softly breathing zephyr, which carried the blithe song of birds upon its wing, and penetrating to every ear, might have infused serene happiness into every heart.

But, ah! what horrible rumour is this which towards nine o'clock begins to circulate like wildfire throughout the palatial mansion?—has murder been doing its dread work during the darkness of the past night? or is it some frightful error? No: it is all but too true; and the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles has been made the victim of a foul and mysterious assassination.

It appeared, from the statement of Makepeace, that he went as usual to his master's suite of rooms a little before nine o'clock; and that on entering the bed-chamber, he was horrified on beholding the sheet deluged with blood. He approached—and found the Earl lying on his back, with his throat literally cut from ear to ear. Seized with a mortal terror, he rushed forth on the landing, and raised that cry of murder, which awaking such terrible echoes, speedily reverberated throughout the mansion. Then the other servants began flocking thither, with ghastly horror depicted on their countenances: Adolphus, the Countess, and Isabella, from their own respective chambers, sped with wild distracted looks in the same direction;—and that morning of such serene blissfulness out of doors, was one fraught with dread confusion, trouble, mystery, and affright within those walls.

Who could have done the deed? Where was the weapon with which it was accomplished? This was not to be found. The nearest surgeon of the neighbourhood, who was quickly sent for, and who was speedily on the spot, declared that the Earl must have been dead some hours—and that it was consequently in the depth of the night when the red right arm of Murder bared itself for this tremendous deed. Furthermore, the medical authority affirmed that the fatal wound was inflicted by some very sharp instrument; but that from certain appearances, he was convinced it was not with a razor,—his opinion being that it was a large knife. Whatever the instrument were, death must have been instantaneous: the unfortunate old nobleman must have died almost without a groan. But that instrument, as we have already said, was not to be found; and when the police arrived upon the spot, nothing was discovered to attach suspicion to any particular individual. Every room throughout the mansion was strictly searched,—Adolphus, the Countess, and Isabella desiring that theirs might form no exception, as they did not choose to draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the domestics under such circumstances. But in none of the many apartments of that house was there discovered the slightest scintillation of a clue to the assassin. Yet the conviction was strong that the perpetrator of the deed must be an inmate of the mansion. No burglarious entry had been effected: no door had been forced—no window had been found open, when the servants first descended from their own chambers. If therefore the assassin was not a dweller within those walls, could he have been secreted for hours beneath the Earl's bed awaiting his opportunity to commit the dreadful crime? But in that case, how did he escape after the deed was done? Certainly not during the night: for, as already stated, no door nor window was found open in the morning; and such assassin could not have slipped forth from the premises after the servants had risen without being perceived by those who were moving about within the walls, or by the gardeners in the grounds. No—it appeared incontestable that the murderer was an inmate of the mansion: but on whom could suspicion alight? There seemed to be no reason to imagine that any one had a motive for such a crime: or at least such was the opinion formed by the police after carefully and minutely inquiring into the case.

But if the author of the deed were thus involved in an obscurity which seemed impenetrable, not less mysterious was the motive itself. Could it have been plunder? There was no evidence in the Earl's suite of apartments that a single thing of any value had been removed. His purse, containing some thirty or forty pounds in notes and gold, was on the toilet-table,—as were his superb watch and massive chain, his diamond rings, and several other articles of jewellery. A box containing other jewels stood on a chest of drawers; and though unlocked, it had not been rifled. Plunder therefore was assuredly not the assassin's object. Then, what could have been his motive? Private vengeance? No: this idea seemed altogether incompatible with the harmless, frivolous, inoffensive character of the murdered nobleman. The mystery was great: it seemed as if it would remain impenetrable. In ninety-nine cases out of every hundred where a foul crime has been committed, suspicion at once attaches itself to some individual; the circumstances of the deed present a clue—or there is a known motive which might have influenced the suspected person. But in the present case there was nothing of all this—no clue left behind by any want of caution on the assassin's part—no visible object which any one had to gain by such a deed—no known motive that might have served as an impulse to any particular individual.

After the discovery of the terrific crime, the Countess of Lascelles was borne in a swoon back to her own chamber, whence she had hurried to the tragic scene, as above described. Isabella, on learning that it was all too true, likewise fell into unconsciousness, and was conveyed to her apartment,—a serious indisposition supervening. Adolphus appeared most profoundly horrified and shocked; and for some hours he was quite incapable of issuing any instructions. Makepeace bewailed the loss of the master who had always been so kind and indulgent to him; and all the other servants of that extensive establishment seemed to be stricken with consternation and grief. Indeed these feelings appeared to be universal within those walls;—and yet many doubtless said to themselves, "There must be *one* accomplished dissembler amongst us—*one* being whose hypocrisy is as perfect as his crime is tremendous!"

It was therefore a fearful thing for those who were innocent, to be compelled thus to reason within themselves. As one looked upon another, he said to himself, "At this moment I may be gazing on the assassin:"—and that other was with equal probability saying the same thing within his own heart as he looked in the face of the former. Such a state of things aggravated the horror, the dismay, and the consternation which prevailed throughout the house: yet no one offered to leave it; for such a proceeding, by itself alone, might have at once drawn down suspicion on the head of such person.

There was a Coroner's inquest: but nothing transpired to throw the faintest light on this appalling mystery. The proceedings terminated without affixing the remotest suspicion upon any individual. Not a garment had been found bearing a blood-stain in any room, save that where the tragedy itself occurred: no knife, nor weapon of any other description, had been specially pointed at as the one which had been used by the murderer's hand. The tragedy created an immense sensation out of doors: the mystery in which it was enveloped, struck with awe the myriad readers of newspapers. Everything appeared to be out of the ordinary course in reference to this foul crime; for not even did the whisper of scandal suggest a single name as that of the probable author of the deed. Conjecture itself was stupified—surmise was prostrate. It appeared to be one of those deeds which, terrible in their mystery and inscrutable in their motive, now and then occur upon the theatre of the world as if to prove that things may take place on earth defying the power of man to fathom, and which are to remain entombed in darkness until the finger of heaven for its own wise purposes shall draw aside the veil and bring all to light.

Throughout the day when the murder was discovered and the two following ones, the Countess of Lascelles kept her chamber,—a physician being in almost constant attendance upon her, as she was in a state of fever, and frequently hysterical. The Earl of Lascelles,—as we must now denominate Adolphus, for he refused not to adopt the rank to which the world believed him entitled, and which there seemed nobody to dispute,—kept his own room for the greater portion of the first day: but on the second he attended at the inquest; and afterwards he assumed the position of head of the establishment. But he appeared deeply to feel the terrific tragedy which had taken place: his countenance bore every indication of profound sorrow—his step was languid and slow—his voice was mournful and subdued: he appeared as if he were merely exerting a little energy for duty's sake, but that it cost him the most painful efforts to do so. As for poor Isabella,—she continued seriously indisposed; and we may as well here remark at once that it was not until after the funeral of her deceased uncle that she crossed the threshold of her own apartment.

But it was before that funeral took place—and on the fourth day following the night of the mysterious murder—that Adolphus and Ethel met for the first time since the moment when, on the morning of the foul deed's discovery, they had rushed from their respective chambers to the scene of the crime to ascertain whether the frightful intelligence which had reached them was indeed true. It was in the drawing-room that they now met on this fourth day, as above stated; and they were alone there together. Ethel had so far recovered that she was enabled to ascend without assistance to that apartment: but she was much changed—the colour had totally forsaken her cheeks, which were haggard and sunken;—and the sable garments which she wore, together with the snowy white cap of widowhood, made her look more ghost-like still. We have already said that Adolphus was changed likewise; and his mourning garb threw out in ghastlier relief the pallor of his own countenance.

Ethel was in that drawing-room first; and she was half reclining on the sofa when Adolphus—now Earl of Lascelles—slowly opened the door and made his appearance. Strange indeed was the look which these two beings threw upon each other; and these looks were precisely similar in their expression. It was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Ethel looked upon Adolphus: it was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Adolphus looked upon Ethel. But the next instant the aspect of each countenance changed: Ethel looked with surprise upon Adolphus, as if she had expected another species of gaze on his part—and Adolphus looked with surprise on Ethel, as if her own gaze had equally astonished him.

He walked slowly up to her; and fixing his eyes upon her, said in a low deep voice, "Ethel, you have sold your soul to Satan on my account!"

"What, Adolphus!" she exclaimed: "is it possible that you dare hurl the terrific weight of your own crime upon me?"

"Ethel," quickly rejoined Adolphus, "this is outrageous—this is horrible!"

"Adolphus," retorted the Countess, "this is playing the part of unheard-of villany, to impute your crime to me!"

"Good God!" murmured the Earl of Lascelles, staggering back as he pressed his hand to his brow: "do I hear aright? or am I dreaming?"

"Adolphus," said Ethel, "of what use is this shocking hypocrisy on your part? Methought when you first entered the room that your looks would quail in my presence——"

"Woman, this is intolerable!" interrupted Adolphus, fiercely grasping Ethel's arm. "It was I who thought that you would not dare look me in the face!"

"Unhand me, murderer!" cried the Countess, recoiling as if with a strong shudder from his touch.

"Murderess!" literally growled Adolphus with savage ferocity. "Beautiful as you once were, you are now loathsome to my eyes!"

"Monster!" retorted Ethel, with keenest bitterness: "you are horrible as a fiend in my sight!"

There was nearly a minute's silence,—during which those two beings gazed upon each other, with the strongest feelings of horror, aversion, and loathing expressed in their countenances. Their eyes appeared to burn: yet they did not shoot forth fitful glances—it was with a steady fire shining from the eyes of one towards the eyes of the other, transfusing mutual abhorrence! Yet neither seemed to dare avert those eyes from the other, lest it should be thought there was quailing and cowardice: for whatever the truth might be, very certain it was that Adolphus chose to affix the crime upon Ethel, while Ethel seemed equally resolute in affixing it upon Adolphus.

"You dare stand before me thus?" said the Countess, at length breaking silence: "you dare meet my regards thus steadily, when your own heart tells you that you are a murderer?"

"And you, Ethel," retorted the Earl of Lascelles, "exhibit such a spectacle of brazen female hardihood that fills me with even more astonishment than your capability of committing the crime itself—for your conscience all the while is whispering that you *are* a murderess!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Ethel, quivering visibly from head to foot, "that there should be such a power of hypocrisy in man. What earthly purpose does it serve you to deny your crime in my presence, when you know that, considering all the past, I dare not betray you?"

"Come, Ethel," responded Adolphus, "at least let this scene of hideous mockery terminate. Confess your guilt: for you likewise know that I dare not betray you!"

"Wretch! coward—thus to treat a woman!" cried Ethel.

"Ah! but if that woman, being a murderess," retorted Adolphus, "brings it all upon herself!"

"You are driving me to madness!" exclaimed the Countess, stamping her foot upon the floor. "Does not all evidence brand you with the guilt of this stupendous crime? Were not your parting words to me, on the day preceding the night of that crime, that sooner than marry Isabella you would *do the very worst?*"

"Ah! but you, Ethel, echoed those words!" retorted Adolphus; "and you declared that sooner than see me lead Isabella to the altar, you would *do the very worst!* Methought at the time you alluded to suicide——"

"And I did!" ejaculated Ethel, vehemently. "But I, on my part, thought at the time that you meant to dare my husband's anger and vengeance even to the uttermost——"

"And I did mean all that!" exclaimed Adolphus. "I meant that sooner than wed Isabella after all you had said, I would flee away to the Continent and let the Earl expose—repudiate—discard me if he thought fit. Yes—that was my meaning! But your's, Ethel, was very, very different!"

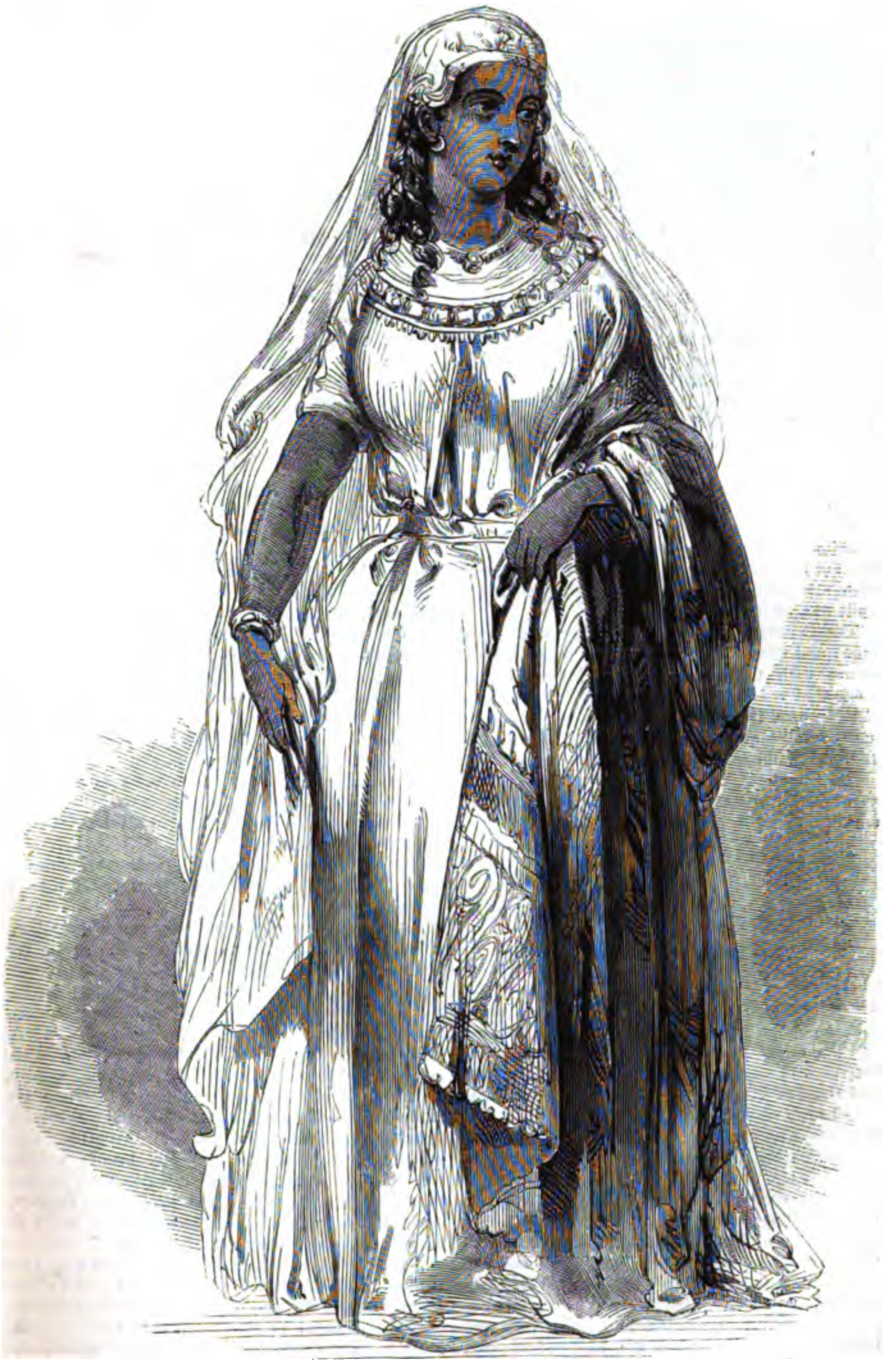
"No, Adolphus—as God is my judge," cried the Countess, passionately, "I swear——"

"For heaven's sake add not perjury and blasphemy," interrupted Adolphus, with an air of horror and affright, "to the other stupendous crime! For it is I who swear—I who take God to witness——"

"No, no!" almost shrieked forth Ethel: "become not a perjurer! become not a blasphemer!"

It was now the Earl of Lascelles who stamped his foot with rage; and he began pacing the room like a lion chafing in his den: while Ethel took shorter but not less agitated walks to and fro on the hearth-rug.

"Adolphus," she at length said, abruptly stopping him, and looking fixedly upon his countenance, "you seem to have forgotten that you told me the tale of that interview with the Earl, when he revealed to you that you were not his son. Oh, be not thus obstinate! Remain silent, if you will: but do not—do not persevere in a course as dreadful as it is dastard!——do not, by attributing the crime to me, for an instant entertain the hope that you can make me think it was not *your* hand which really perpetrated it! Had you not every motive? Were you not trembling at the idea of



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losing rank—position—fortune? Did you not therefore say to yourself that you would for ever silence the lips that alone could tell the tale: for you knew that mine were already sealed by that guilty love which had subsisted between us!"

"If I have listened to you in silence," responded Adolphus, "it is not that my blood has ceased to boil with indignant impatience. Ethel, Ethel, it is you who thus with a detestable dissimulation persevere in attributing the crime to me!—it is you, I say, who hope to make me fancy that you really did not perpetrate that crime! You speak of motives:—*you* had every motive! Think you that I comprehend not the terrific jealousy which swayed your heart when I spoke of wedding Isabella? Ah, confess that it was through love of me you did this deed!—confess it, Ethel, and I will pardon you——but for heaven's sake persevere not in ascribing it unto me!"

"I also, Adolphus, have curbed my impatience," answered the Countess, "that I might give you a fair chance for retractation, confession, and atonement:—but you are obstinate! Now listen. We will not blind our eyes to the fact that the crime rests between us two: for no other living being had a motive in perpetrating it. It was therefore I or you who committed it——and you know, Adolphus, that it was yourself!"

"Ah, Ethel! you have indeed said truly," he exclaimed, "that it lies between us two: but you will not look me much longer in the face and with such astounding dissimulation deny that all the guilt was wholly and solely yours!"

The Countess literally ground her teeth with rage; and then she muttered in a voice that was hoarse with the same feeling, "Miscreant, you know that you are a murderer!"

"No, fiend in female shape! it is you who are a murderess!"—and having thus spoken, the Earl of Lascelles walked abruptly forth from the room.

The Countess flung herself upon the sofa, and gave way to bitterest weeping and most convulsing sobs.

CHAPTER LXIII.

CHRISTINA AND THE AYAH.

THREE weeks had elapsed since the visit which Madame Angelique paid to the Princess Indora; and the oriental lady had not as yet carried her project into execution with regard to Oaklands. The Duke of Marchmont had been suddenly called out of town on some particular business; and thus Madame Angelique had found no opportunity of communicating with him. She had written a note to this effect to the Princess Indora, at the same time that she sent home the European costumes which her Highness had ordered.

Three weeks, too, had elapsed since that visit which Christina paid to Zoe, and when she had every reason to believe that this amiable lady suspected the passion which her husband cherished for our heroine. Christina had been very unhappy since that date: but she had endeavoured to conceal her feelings as much as possible from the Princess,—though the latter on three or four occasions kindly questioned her whether she had not something which troubled her mind? Christina gave evasive responses; and these tended to confirm Indora's suspicion that her young friend was not altogether happy.

Accordingly, one day when they were seated together in the elegantly furnished drawing-room, the Princess said in a gentle voice, and with a look of the most benevolent sympathy, "I am afraid, my dear Christina, that you have something which is preying upon your mind? If it be so, tell me—hesitate not to make a confidante of me. I am your friend—I love you—and I wish you well."

"I am deeply grateful to your ladyship," answered Christina, "for the many, many kindnesses which I experience at your hands: I have every reason to be happy beneath your roof——"

"Perhaps you miss the society in which you were wont to mingle when at Lady Octavian Meredith's? Here it must be dull for you——"

"Oh, no—far from it!" exclaimed Christina, hoping to divert the conversation into some other channel. "I love the life which I am leading here——"

"I know that you always speak with sincerity," observed the Princess; "and therefore my mind is at ease on that point. Indeed," she added, with a smile, "your time is well occupied—for you make occupation for yourself. It is exceedingly kind of you to take so much pains in teaching Sagoonah to read English accurately:—but are you sure that she does not take advantage of your kindness?"

"Oh, no, my lady!" exclaimed the amiable Christina. "Sagoonah is so willing a pupil, that I experience the utmost delight in instructing her. I had not been many days in your ladyship's house, before I saw that Sagoonah was most anxious to make herself thoroughly acquainted with the English language. She had already a very tolerable idea of my native tongue: but she wished to be able to read it—and your ladyship would be surprised, if you now heard her, at the progress she has made."

"I have no doubt of it," observed Indora; "for she is a young woman of remarkable intelligence."

At this moment the object of the conversation entered the room to make some announcement to her mistress; and those three females constituted a group which the eye of even an anchorite could not have surveyed with indifference. The Princess Indora, in her superbly picturesque garb, and with her magnificent charms, half-reclining upon the velvet cushions of the sofa—the ayah, with her darker style of loveliness, standing before her in that attitude of respectful attention which she was wont to adopt—and the youthful Christina, invested with that exquisite virginal beauty which rendered her a being so well calculated to excite the tenderest interest,—these three, we repeat, being thus grouped, would have formed an admirable subject for the pencil of the artist.

An hour after that conversation between the Princess and Christina, we shall find the latter seated in another room, in company with Sagoonah, who was engaged in the practice of her English reading. Here was another interesting spectacle,—that Hindoo woman, evidently exerting all her powers to render herself proficient in the task which that beauteous English maiden was so willingly superintending! And when Christina bestowed well-deserved praises upon her pupil, the superb dark eyes of the latter lighted up to an almost preternatural lustre, flashing with joy and triumph at the progress which she thus made.

A few hours later the night has come; and Christina is alone in her own chamber at the Princess's villa. It was half-past ten o'clock; and the maiden had not long retired thither. She sate down at the toilet-table, while combing out the masses of her raven hair: but gradually she fell into a profound reverie—her hands sank upon her knees—the comb dropped without her perceiving it—and her hair remained floating all dishevelled upon her shoulders and down her back, lower than her waist. There were several topics which thus engaged Christina's profound meditation. She thought of Zoe—the amiable, the interesting, the kind-hearted lady, who she feared had been making the most dreadful sacrifice of her own feelings rather than suffer her husband to perceive that she had fathomed the secret of the love which he entertained for another. Then Christina thought of this love which Lord Octavian cherished towards herself: she strove to conjure up a feeling which might satisfy her that she was annoyed and indignant at being the object of this love: but she could not thus far do violence to the tender sentiment which existed with a certain degree of reciprocity in her own heart. Then she thought of her brother who a little while previously had lost his situation with the Earl of Lascelles, and had not as yet obtained another; and then her reflections turned, with mingled awe and horror, upon the mysterious death of that unfortunate nobleman.

Christina's reverie thus lasted for a long time; and when she gradually aroused herself from it, and consulted her watch—which was a gift from the Princess Indora—she perceived that it was past eleven o'clock. She was hastening to continue her night-toilet; and in another quarter of an hour was ready to retire to rest. But just as she was about to extinguish her candle, she thought she heard the sounds of footsteps descending the stairs from the floor above that on which her own chamber was situated. They were steps so light and airy that only the keenest sense of hearing could have caught them; and Christina felt convinced that the tread was the stealthy one of a person not wishing to be overheard. A vague terror seized upon her: for she all in a moment remembered that warning letter which Mr. Redliffe had sent to the Princess, and which her Highness had shown her about three weeks back. That letter, as the reader will remember, was to the effect that some evil-disposed persons might probably seek to inveigle Indora or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare; and as the pure-minded Christina was too unsophisticated and inexperienced to be enabled to fathom the real significancy of Mr. Redcliffe's allusion, her imagination naturally excited this vague terror which now seized upon her. She drew close towards the door—and listened with suspended breath. Again she caught the sounds of footsteps: they were now descending the lower flight—and in a few moments they ceased. She endeavoured to calm herself with the idea that it might be Sagoonah, or one of the other female-servants, descending for some purpose: but if so, wherefore that evidently studied stealthiness of tread?—as it was not so very late that the fear of awakening the household need be entertained. Perhaps Christina was rendered somewhat nervous and apprehensive by having reflected on the mysterious murder of the Earl of Lascelles; and this impression being strong on her mind—together with the recollection, so vividly conjured up, of Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter—naturally filled her with vague misgivings and with a dread of some unknown danger.

She opened the door gently—and again listened. All was now still. She thought of retiring to rest: but scarcely had she closed the door again, when that mysterious terror came back with renewed force; and she felt that she could not possibly sleep, nor even lie tranquilly in her couch, unless she were reassured in respect to the safety of the premises. She remained at the door to listen if the footsteps would return: but a quarter of an hour passed—and all continued quiet. She thought of going to the Princess's chamber and telling her what she had heard: but then she reflected that if her apprehensions should prove groundless, she would feel humiliated and look foolish at having given way to such terror. But she thought she might at all events ascend to the female-servants' chambers to see if they were there: for the conviction was strong in her mind that she had heard footsteps descending, and that they had not ascended again. Enveloping herself in a muslin wrapper, and taking the candle in her hand, she proceeded up-stairs with a tread as light as if she were a spirit gliding. On reaching the landing above, she saw that Sagoonah's chamber-door stood open; and on entering, she found that Sagoonah herself was not there. They were therefore the ayah's footsteps that she had heard: but why was she thus long absent? The thought now struck Christina that Sagoonah must be ill; and she went down stairs—still with the same noiseless tread as before, in order not to disturb the Princess. A light was issuing from the boudoir, the door of which stood open. Christina advanced—and looking in, beheld Sagoonah bending over one of the huge volumes of the *Times* newspaper, which were kept in that room. The Hindoo woman had her back towards the door: the volume was spread open upon the table; and she was evidently so absorbed in its contents that she did not catch the rustling of Christina's dress.

The first thought which struck our artless young heroine, was that the ayah experienced such an ardent longing to render herself proficient in the English tongue, that she was even inclined to sacrifice a portion of her night's rest to the prosecution of her studies: but all of a sudden she was startled by the vehement manner in which Sagoonah gave utterance to something in her own native tongue, and which was therefore incomprehensible to the maiden. At the same time Sagoonah stood up from her previously leaning posture; and glancing around, so strange a light flashed from her eyes on beholding Christina, that the latter was absolutely terrified. There was an expression of rage too on the ayah's countenance, where the rich red blood mantled through the duskiness of her complexion: but instantaneously composing herself, she placed her finger to her lips of vivid vermilion, to enjoin silence. Then beckoning Christina to enter the boudoir, she gently closed the door.

"What made you seek me, Miss Ashton?" asked the ayah, in a voice which though perfectly respectful, nevertheless displayed a firm resolution to have her query satisfied: then, suddenly recollecting something, she hastened to close the volume, as if to prevent Christina from seeing what particular part of the huge file she had been reading.

"I heard footsteps descending the stairs," answered Christina: "they did not re-ascend—I was alarmed—I went up to your room—not finding you there, I thought you were ill—and with this apprehension I came to see if I could be of any service to you."

While the maiden was thus speaking, Sagoonah's luminous dark eyes were riveted upon her, as if to read into the very depths of her soul, and thus glean whether she were truly explaining her motives. But it was impossible to doubt Christina's sincerity: her looks were artlessness itself;—and Sagoonah was satisfied.

"You must do me a favour, Miss Ashton," she said; "and that is, *not* to mention to the Princess that you found me reading one of these great books. Her Highness would be very angry with me; and I am sure you would not wish to draw down her displeasure upon my head."

"I certainly should be sorry to do anything of the kind," answered the maiden: "but I think you must be in error to suppose that your good-hearted mistress would be offended——"

"She would!" Sagoonah emphatically responded, as she thus interrupted our heroine.

"Then if you are conscious of an indiscretion," said Christina, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "wherefore did you commit it?"

"Do not ask me, Miss Ashton!" rejoined the Hindoo woman: and again there was a sinister flashing in her burning, haunting eyes. "Promise me the favour which I have requested—and you know not with what deep gratitude I shall regard you!"

"Rest assured, Sagoonah," replied our heroine, "I shall not travel out of my way to do you an injury. But my pledge is given with the understanding that you do not repeat that which, according to your own words, you know to be an indiscretion."

"I will not repeat it," answered Sagoonah; "and I thank you, Miss Ashton, for your kindness."

They then issued together from the boudoir; and cautiously ascending the stairs, separated to their respective chambers. But Christina could not help thinking it strange that the Princess Indora was likely to be offended if it came to her knowledge that her Hindoo attendant made use of her progress in her English studies to peep into those files of the *Times*.

On the following morning Christina received a note from Zoe, requesting her if possible to call upon her in the course of that day. It was most affectionately worded—but made not the slightest allusion to Lord Octavian. It informed Christina that the health of the writer continued to be very bad, and that the physician had ordered her to go abroad for change of air.

"If Zoe be really acquainted with her husband's unfortunate love for me," said our heroine to herself, "I can scarcely think that she would invite me to the house, unless perfectly confident that Lord Octavian will not be present. Therefore I will go!"

In order to do Christina full justice, we must observe that if she had for a moment fancied she would meet Lord Octavian at the house in the Regent's Park, she would not have gone: she would have even preferred the alternative of appearing ungrateful and unkind to Zoe. She showed the letter to the Princess,—who at once gave her assent, and placed the carriage at Christina's disposal. On reaching her destination, she found Zoe alone in the drawing-room; and the amiable girl was shocked by her friend's appearance. Pale, ill, and languid as she was on the former occasion,—she looked infinitely more sickly now. She was reclining upon a sofa; and it was with a visible effort she raised herself up to a sitting posture to greet our heroine.

"My dear Zoe, you are indeed very ill!" said Christina, the tears starting from her eyes as she embraced her friend.

"Yes: I suffer much——from indisposition," responded Zoe, in the mild voice of completest resignation; "and as I told you in my letter, I am going abroad. Those whose assent it was necessary to obtain, have given it; and I shall depart with as little delay as possible."

Zoe evidently alluded to her father and her husband: but Christina was struck by the manner in which she thus spoke of them,—as if she studiously yet delicately avoided the mention of Lord Octavian's name.

"I think I shall go to the South of France or to Italy," continued Zoe; "and perhaps a more genial climate may restore me——or perhaps," she added, with a mild sadness, "I may find a tomb beneath the sunny sky of the South!"

"Good heaven, Zoe! talk not thus despondingly!" exclaimed Christina, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes. "You will recover—rest assured that you will recover! It is all the effect of that accident——But now you are weeping!"

"And are not *you* weeping, my sweet friend?" asked Zoe, smiling with a soft sadness through her tears. "Come—let us endeavour to cheer each other. I do not think that I shall see you again before I leave England; and it was to bid you farewell that I asked you to visit me to-day. I am rejoiced you have come——I have a little token of my regard for you——Remain here while I go and fetch it."

With these words, Lady Octavian Meredith rose from the sofa, and slowly quitted the room,—her every movement indicating langour and lassitude of the frame. Christina was deeply affected by Zoe's appearance; and she had indeed a misgiving lest her health had received a shock which it would never recover. She had remained barely a couple of minutes alone, when the door opened—and Lord Octavian Meredith made his appearance. There was hurry, and trouble, and wildness in his whole manner; and hastily accosting our heroine, he abruptly exclaimed, "Christina, I am half mad! That angel-wife of mine has no doubt penetrated the secret of the love with which you have inspired me—that love which is consuming me——"

At first Christina was filled with confusion and trepidation at the sudden appearance of Octavian: the next moment she was terrified by his manner: but now she said in an agitated voice, "My lord, I beseech you not to address me in these terms! It is an insult to that wife of yours who is indeed the angel you declare her to be!"

"But you *must* hear me, Christina!" replied Octavian, who was labouring under the most powerful excitement. "To whom else can I address myself on such a subject, if not to you,—*you* whom she loves—*you* who are her friend——"

"My lord, for the very reason that your amiable wife regards me as a friend——"

"Christina, it is useless for you to treat me thus! Good heavens, your coldness kills me! Those who love, can recognise love in others—and I know that I am not altogether indifferent to you!"

"My lord, I can hear no more!" exclaimed our heroine, with burning blushes upon her cheeks: and she moved towards the door.

"Recollect!" he said, hastening to intercept her passage: "if you leave the room thus abruptly, Zoe will inquire the reason—and you will have to inform her that I have insulted you—that I have outraged your delicacy,—and what a dagger will this be to drive deep down into her heart!"

"Good heavens, in what a position are you placing me!" murmured Christina, so painfully affected—so bewildered, perplexed, and even anguished, that she knew not what to do.

"Christina, I tell you that I am half mad!" hastily rejoined Lord Octavian Meredith. "That angel in human shape is making every sacrifice of feeling for my sake! She knows that I love another—but she does all she can to prevent me from suspecting that she has that knowledge which is preying upon her very vitals! And now she is going abroad—and she will not allow me to accompany her!"

"My lord," interrupted Christina vehemently, and even with passion,—"it would be infamous—it would be abominable on your part, to allow your wife to go alone in search of that health which you yourself have destroyed—and which, alas! alas! she may perhaps never regain!"

"I take God to witness," cried Meredith, still labouring under the strongest excitement, "that I have implored and entreated—I have prayed and besought Zoe to permit me to go with her: but she will not. Mild, submissive, and meek in all other respects as she is, she shows herself firm and decided upon this one point. But, Oh! the pretexts and excuses which in her magnanimity of soul she invents! She declares that to drag me after her, weak and languid as she is—to have the continued consciousness that I am enchained to an invalid wife—would only render her Continental travel a punishment to herself, rather than a means of working a benefit. No: she will not allow me!—and she has even succeeded in persuading her father that to regain her health she must go alone!"

"My lord," cried Christina, again speaking vehemently and passionately; "if you do not accompany her ladyship, you will be guilty of a cruelty so abhorrent——"

"That it will even make *you* hate me?" he said, in a voice which was hoarse with the excitement of his harrowed feelings. "By heaven, it will only require that to impel me to suicide at once!"

"My lord!" half-shrieked Christina.

"Oh, yes! I tell you that I am well nigh mad," ejaculated the young nobleman: and he passionately tossed the rich clusters of his hair away from his throbbing brows. "You know not how much I have suffered since you were here last—three mortal weeks of one long agony! Heaven can attest that I have striven—Oh! I have striven to do my duty towards Zoe, and to banish *you* from my memory——"

"My lord," cried Christina, "your language as a married man is an offence and an insult to my ears. You know that I dare not leave the room for fear that your angel-wife should suspect how you are treating me: and therefore your conduct is cruel—most ungenerous! It amounts to a persecution: and I entreat——no, I *command* you to be silent!"

"Oh! give me your hatred, Christina, if you will," exclaimed the young nobleman, who did indeed appear as if he were going mad, "rather than your cold indifference! Am I to blame because I have no control over my own feelings? No, no—it were monstrous to judge me thus harshly! Christina," he continued, in a milder manner, "I tell you again and again that I have striven to do my duty towards Zoe: I have forced myself to dwell upon all her goodness—her amiability—and what is more, upon the sublime generosity of her disposition; I have endeavoured to catch the transfusion of that love which she cherishes for me——but in all these have I failed! Now, am I to be blamed for this? No, no—I am to be pitied!—and you see before you the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth!"

It were impossible to describe the feelings which agitated the young maiden as she listened to Octavian's speech. It affected her almost to tears: and yet her virgin modesty was offended that he should suffer her, however distantly, to understand that it was his love for *her* which prevented him from performing his duty to his wife. She could not help pitying him from the very bottom of her soul,—at the same time that she felt she ought not to listen to the language he was uttering. She would have flown from the room—but the strong reason already specified compelled her to remain there. Never was her situation so painful!—and she could have thrown herself upon the seat to give vent to her feelings in tears, only that she dreaded lest Zoe should suddenly make her appearance. Ah! but a thought struck her.

"My lord," she hastily said, "Zoe was to be absent but for a minute—and twenty have elapsed since she left the room! She may be ill—and I go to succour her."

"Stay!" cried Octavian: "stay!" and he seized her hand.

"Not another second! Unhand me, my lord!" cried Christina proudly.

The next instant the door closed behind the agitated girl: but scarcely had she thus passed out upon the landing, when she caught the sounds of rapid footsteps ascending the flight leading to the upper storey,—footsteps so light that they were only just audible. A sickening sensation seized upon Christina. What if Zoe had been listening? Rapid as the lightning casts its blaze upon the entire canopy of heaven, did the damsel review her own conduct during the wildly agitating scene with Octavian Meredith; and she saw that she had not given utterance to a single word that she could now wish unspoken. On the contrary, every syllable that had issued from her own lips was precisely such as she would have uttered if able at the time deliberately to ponder what she was about to say. With this consciousness of perfect rectitude of behaviour, her presence of mind was completely regained—her strength of purpose was recovered; and she ascended to Zoe's chamber.

She found Lady Octavian Meredith seated in an easy chair, with a languid and enfeebled appearance—but otherwise with an air of serene composure.

"It must have been a servant whose footsteps I heard," was the thought which rapidly traversed Christina's brain: "for if Zoe had been listening, she could not possibly thus dissemble!"

"Pardon me, my dearest friend," said Lady Octavian, in that sweetly soft plaintive voice which for some time past had been habitual to her; "pardon me for having thus long left you to yourself—but I was seized with such a sense of exhaustion that I was compelled to sit down and rest. Here, Christina! accept this trifle from one who loves you;"—and she presented our heroine with a locket of choicest workmanship, and containing some of her own hair.

Christina pressed it to her lips; and then obeying some strong impulse, she sank upon her knees—took Zoe's hand—and covered it with her kisses and her tears. She sobbed audibly—but spoke not—and yet there was a world of eloquence in the whole proceeding on her part: for not more plainly could the meaning of her almost involuntary conduct have been expressed if she had exclaimed, "Pardon me, dearest Zoe! I know that I am the cause—though heaven can attest how innocently—of all you suffer!"

Yet those words were *not* spoken; and whether Zoe comprehended the silent eloquence of the weeping and kneeling maiden's proceeding, must be left for the reader to conjecture. Certain it is that Lady Octavian wound her arms around Christina's neck—strained her to her bosom—sobbed and wept likewise: and thus were their farewells expressed!

When Christina again found herself in the carriage, as it bore her homeward, she could scarcely recollect how she had reached it after that parting scene with the amiable lady whom she feared that she should never behold again. Profound was the affliction which Christina experienced; and on regaining the villa, she hastened up to her own chamber, where she once more gave way to the wild outpouring of her anguish.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE EXPLANATION OF A PLOT.

It was evening; and Madame Angelique was seated in her elegantly furnished room,—the table well spread with dessert and wine. It was evident she expected somebody; for she frequently consulted her watch,—murmuring to herself, "This note specified nine punctually, and it is considerably past."

At length the door opened, and a domestic announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"I know it is shameful to keep a lady waiting," said his Grace, with a sort of forced good-humoured jocularity; "but I was detained at the Club where I dined."

"Better late than never, my lord," responded Madame Angelique; "and now if your Grace would honour me by taking a glass of wine, I will explain how I have progressed in a certain matter in which your Grace is interested.

"Is it that of the Indian lady?" inquired the Duke, as he helped himself to some wine. "By heaven! I hope your answer will be in the affirmative—though I care not even if it should be to tell me that the hope points towards that ayah of her's: for the magnificent beauty of the one is equalled by the darker glory of the other's."

"Ah! then you have seen them, my lord?" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with a smile of satisfaction.

"You had so piqued my curiosity a few weeks ago, when you renewed the subject one night that I was here——"

"That your Grace went and laid wait at Bayswater to catch a glimpse of them in their carriage?—eh, my lord?" said the milliner with an arch smile.

"Precisely so," responded Marchmont: "and I was so interested that I went a second time. On the first occasion I beheld the lady and her ayah; and, good heavens! what wondrous beauty on the part of each! The second time I saw the lady with a young English girl, whom to my astonishment I at once recognised. She is Miss Ashton—the sister of that very identical young dog who spoilt my game in respect to Stanhope and my wife. She was at first with the Merediths—and to tell you the truth, I had marked her out as my prey."

"And why, my lord, should you not honour her with your favour in her turn?" inquired Madame Angelique. "I have never seen her—at least not to my knowledge: but if she be worth any trouble——"

"Worth any trouble?" exclaimed Marchmont: "she is worth as much trouble as either the eastern lady or the ayah! She is of a ravishing beauty; and those three together must form a group such as you, Madame Angelique, never had in the saloon adjoining—beautiful as I admit your houris are. But come—tell me what is this satisfactory intelligence which you have to impart?"

"The eastern lady, my lord, will be in your power," replied the infamous woman, "whenever you think fit to say the word. I took the business in hand myself—and fortune favoured me. I found the ayah accessible to bribery on the very first occasion when I dropped her a hint that a great nobleman had fallen in love with both herself and her mistress: but she is a strange creature in her way—for she at once declared that her mistress should have the honour of your Grace's preference, and that she herself would be content to assist in the enterprise."

"Is her mistress at all gay?" inquired Marchmont: "has she been brought over to this country by some wealthy nabob, who by dying or on leaving her, has enriched her?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord!" cried Madame Angelique: "she is a paragon of virtue and propriety. This much the ayah assured me,—giving me to understand that the astutest artifice and the most unscrupulous force must be employed for the vanquishing of that stubborn virtue of hers."

"Then methinks it is a somewhat difficult task?" said the Duke, helping himself to another glass of wine.

"By no means, my lord!" rejoined Madame Angelique. "The train for the artifice is laid: it will be for you to use the violence. I have managed admirably—and success is certain."

"But what in the name of heaven," cried the Duke, "is the lady doing in this country? Surely you must have learnt some particulars——"

"The ayah is a woman of few words—speaks only to the point—and is by no means disposed to waste her breath in unnecessary communications. I could obtain nothing more from her," continued Madame Angelique, "than what was absolutely necessary for the carrying out of our aims. Listen, my lord. I ere now informed your Grace that fortune favoured me—and it was so. Assisted by the ayah, I obtained admission to the lady; and the conversation took such a turn—no matter how—that I came away with the thorough understanding that she is to visit Oaklands for a few days——"

"What! have you made her believe she is to be the guest of the Duchess and myself?" exclaimed Marchmont, evidently at a loss to comprehend the milliner's proceeding.

"Quite the contrary, my lord! The lady supposes that you and the Duchess will not be there at all—but that out of kindness she is to be permitted to make your country-seat her home for a few days; and in her ingenuousness," added Madame Angelique, with a mocking air, "she has been led to fancy that it is quite customary in this country for a nobleman thus to place his mansion at the disposal of a foreigner of distinction, no matter whether male or female."

"Well, but what plan do you suggest?" asked the Duke: "for I cannot for the life of me——"

"Listen, my lord! The lady will go alone to Oaklands: of *that* I am confident;—and what is more, she has provided herself with a quantity of European dresses so that she may not have an extraordinary appearance. Of course her Grace the Duchess will remain ignorant that the lady is at Oaklands: but what is to prevent your lordship from finding your way there late some evening, and entering stealthily? You find the bird in your own cage—and what is more, she has flown voluntarily thither. She *must* succumb; and then it will be for your Grace to convince her of the impossibility of her invoking the law to punish you. For how will the matter stand? Here is a lady, who has lived long enough in England and speaks the language well enough to comprehend all its customs, proceeding of her own accord to your country-seat—leaving her servants behind her—discarding for the time being her own habitual costume—having English dresses made expressly for the purpose,—why, who on earth would believe her tale if she were to proclaim that she had been inveigled into a snare? Shall not I be ready to stand forward to give my own version of the manner in which the arrangement was effected between herself and me?—shall I not at once boldly affirm that I was a messenger of love from your Grace to her—and that she accepted the overture and went to the appointment? Make her understand all this, my lord—and rest assured that she will rather seek to veil her shame as closely as possible, than to expose it uselessly."

"Yes—the plot is admirable!" exclaimed the Duke; "and you are the most accomplished of useful women. But when is the affair to come off?"

"I will write to the lady to-morrow," responded Madame Angelique; "and I have no doubt that on the day after she will repair to Oaklands. It is for your Grace to despatch a messenger with suitable instructions, so that she may be received by the servants in the light of an honoured guest at whose disposal the entire establishment is to be placed so long as it may suit her to sojourn there."

"I will send off the necessary instructions the very first thing in the morning," responded the Duke. "And now, to discourse upon another subject—what about Lettice Rodney?"

"Ah, the ungrateful wretch!" cried Madame Angelique, with an indignation that could not possibly have been greater if it were based on the most honest grounds: "to serve me in such a way after all I had done for her!"

"Well, but what has become of her?" inquired the Duke.

"That is exactly what I should like to ascertain—but she has been spirited away, no one knows where. They say she is penitent. Penitence indeed!"—and with as much disgust as if it were a heinous crime the bare idea of which thus excited her, Madame Angelique screwed up her countenance into a strange contortion.

"Well, relieve your feelings with a glass of wine," said the Duke.

Madame Angelique followed his Grace's counsel; and went on to exclaim, "Who would have believed it? Most people, when their girls get into trouble, leave them to get out again as best they may. But here was I—with a sense of humanity which no doubt was carried to an extreme,—here was I, my lord, rushing off to Liverpool to see the wretch, and to offer to find her lawyers, and counsel, and all that sort of thing—on condition that she kept my name out of the question: but the prison-door was banged in my face—and I was told that Lettice Rodney did not want to see me. Not want to see me!—*me*, her very best friend!——and now I hate her so that I could scratch her eyes out if she came across me!"

"But have you no idea," inquired Marchmont, "who was at the bottom of all those proceedings on her behalf? The newspapers spoke of influential friends——"

"Yes—and they specially mentioned the name of the Stanleys," responded Madame Angelique. "Ah, I recollect!—I saw something hinted about another person being behind the scenes: but I can't fancy who it could be."

"I don't know why," said Marchmont, "but it has occurred to me that the same individual who extorted the confession from Lettice of all that business down at Oaklands in the winter—whose voice she thought familiar, if you recollect, but whose face she could not catch a glimpse of—may have been her secret friend throughout this last affair?"

"But now that it is all over," cried Madame Angelique, "it is scarcely worth while to bewilder oneself with conjecture. Fortunately my name did not transpire at the trial——"

"No—it *was* fortunate," observed the Duke. "By the bye, have you ever heard anything about Eveleen O'Brien?"

"Ah! there's another ungrateful wretch," exclaimed Madame Angelique, again getting excited over her wrongs. "She too has turned penitent! and I'm sure that if penitence becomes an epidemic, like the cholera or anything of that sort, I shall have to shut up shop. No—not while I have such patrons as your Grace!" cried the infamous woman, thinking it necessary to pay the Duke this compliment.

Marchmont rose to take his departure,—previous to doing which, however, he placed a roll of bank-notes in Madame Angelique's hand, as an earnest of his liberality in respect to her precious machinations with regard to the Princess Indora.

Early on the following morning the Duke sent off a message to Oaklands with a letter containing suitable instructions to Purvis, the steward, with regard to the reception that was to be given to the oriental lady; and so little care had he for the feelings of the Duchess, that he did not even think it worth while to add a hint to the effect that the circumstance of this visit to be paid to Oaklands by the lady in question was to be for ever withheld from her Grace's knowledge. At the same time that the messenger set off for Oaklands, the infamous Madame Angelique forwarded a letter to the post, addressed to the Lady Indora, acquainting her that their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont had the pleasure ot placing their country-seat in Hampshire at her ladyship's disposal for so long a time as it might be agreeable to her to sojourn on that domain. Madame Angelique was careful to assure Indora in this letter that the Duke and Duchess were occupying their town-mansion, and had no thought of going into the country for the present,—that therefore the Lady Indora would be perfect mistress of Oaklands—and she (Madame Angelique) wished her ladyship all possible health to enjoy her rambles about the beautiful scenery of the domain.

We ought perhaps to observe that Sagoonah had remained altogether in ignorance of that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the Princess: for Indora had not chosen to terrify her ayah by making her aware that she was the object of any evil design. She had therefore contented herself at the time with issuing precautionary instructions of a general character,—the faithful Mark, the major-domo, being the only one of the servants to whom she confided the nature of that letter. Thus it happened that the name of Mr. Redcliffe was never mentioned by Sagoonah to Madame Angelique.

The Princess Indora duly received Madame Angelique's note; and without communicating its contents to a soul, commenced her preparations for departure. She informed Christina that particular business would take her away for a few days,—during which interval she hoped the young maiden would not feel dull nor lonely; and she gave her permission to invite her brother Christian to pass those few days with her at the villa if she thought fit. Her Highness ordered a post-chaise to be in attendance for the ensuing day; and as she perceived that the faithful Mark—the comptroller of her little household—wore a somewhat anxious countenance as these preparations were going on, she summoned him into her presence,—availing herself of an opportunity when she was alone.

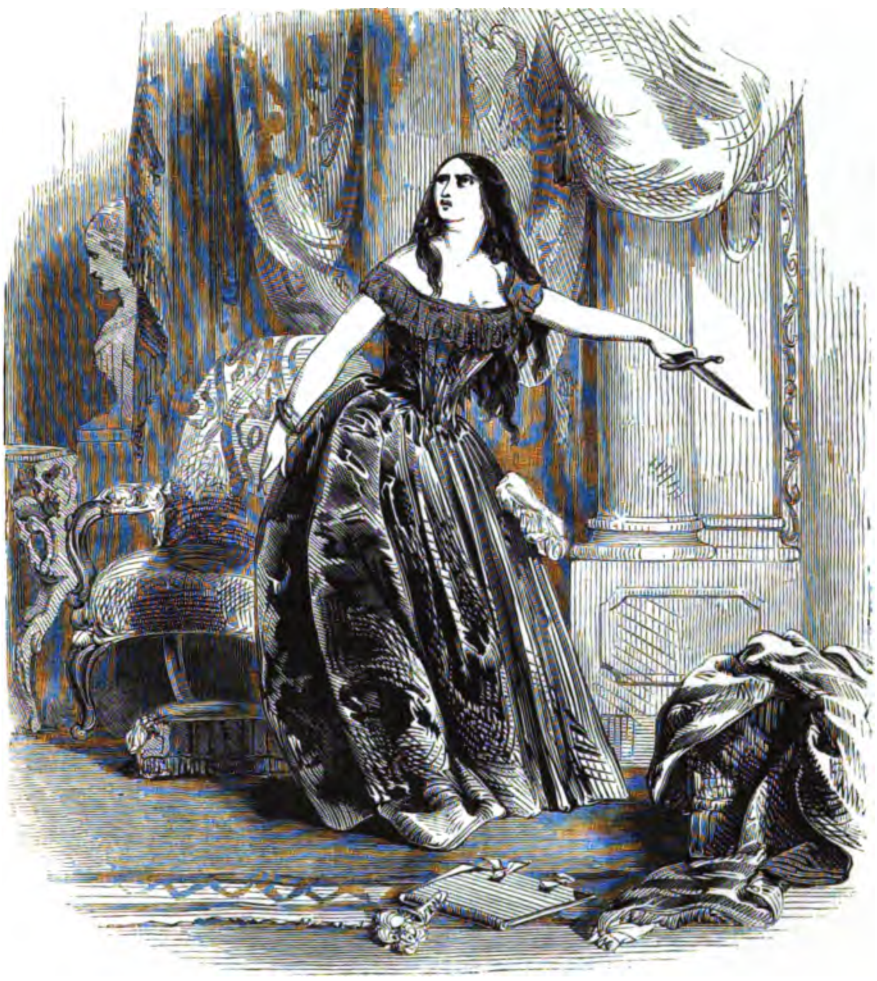
"I am well aware, Mark," she said, "that you entertain a deep interest in my behalf; and you are probably afraid that I am about to fall into some snare which is being set for me. But you need have no such apprehension. The business which takes me hence for a few days, is connected with a matter vitally concerning my own interests. I see my way clearly: but I have thought it necessary to tell you this much, in order to relieve your mind from any misgiving."

"I am truly rejoiced to hear your ladyship speak thus confidently," answered the steward; "and my mind is indeed more at ease."

He then bowed and withdrew,—the Princess not volunteering another syllable of explanation; and Mark had no undue curiosity: it was sufficient for him that Indora seemed to know perfectly well what she was about.

On the following morning the Princess apparelled herself, with Christina's assistance, in one of the European costumes which Madame Angelique had sent home. This was the first time that the King of Inderabad's daughter found herself thus dressed; and it would have been difficult for even the most scrupulous critic in respect to female loveliness, to decide whether she looked handsomer in the picturesque garb which she was wont to wear, or in this apparel made after the most recent Parisian fashion. The superb figure of Indora, with all its richness of contour and the admirable modelling of its limbs, gave its own shape as it were to whatsoever costume she chose to adopt; and hers was a beauty so far transcending all the advantages which feminine charms are wont to derive from the toilet, that it indeed mattered but little what fashion or style she followed. The corsage of an English dress could not set off the grandeur of the bust more completely than the oriental caftan—nor the Parisian bonnet impart additional splendour to the dark glory of her hair.

In her new costume—unattended and alone—the Princess Indora entered the post-chaise; and on leaving the villa, all the instructions she gave to the postilions were that she was going into Hampshire. Thus no one at that villa, except Sagoonah herself, was aware of the Princess's destination; and the Princess suspected not that her ayah knew it.



It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that the post-chaise entered upon the broad domain of Oaklands; and it presently dashed up to the front of the mansion. Purvis and the other domestics, in obedience to the instructions received from the Duke of Marchmont, were in readiness to afford the Princess a suitable welcome; and as she alighted from the post-chaise, they were astonished at her extraordinary beauty. They had been told that an oriental lady of rank, but preserving a strict *incognito*, would arrive at Oaklands; and they had pictured to themselves a dark-skinned female, apparelled in some extraordinary fashion. But when they beheld Indora, whose complexion was only of the most delicate duskiness, not exceeding that of a brunette, and with a fine-grained skin of transparent clearness—apparelled too in a plain but tasteful travelling-costume, such as an English lady might wear—they were all taken by surprise. Yet in this amazement—an amazement which was produced far more by her extraordinary beauty than by any other circumstances,—the respectfulness of their demeanour was not for an instant lost; and she was at once conducted by the old steward to the State Drawing-room. There she was waited upon by females of the household, who escorted her to the bed-chamber prepared for her reception; and now she put off her travelling costume to apparel herself in a richer and more elegant garb. On descending again to the drawing-room, she intimated a wish to be conducted over the mansion; and Purvis was accordingly promptly in attendance. He led her through the various sumptuously furnished apartments; and in due course they reached the picture-gallery. There Indora appeared particularly interested by contemplating the portraits of the Duke of Marchmont's ancestors, and throughout this inspection she conversed with the old steward in the most affable manner.

"I have been made acquainted," she said, still lingering in the gallery, "with that terrible tragedy which is so fearfully connected with the name of Oaklands. Were you here when it occurred?"

Purvis responded in the affirmative; and Indora proceeded to question the old man on various points connected with that deplorable history. Purvis—who was delighted with the frank amiability of the Princess, and also astonished at the fluency with which she spoke in his native tongue, as well as at the superior intelligence which many of her observations indicated—cheerfully satisfied her curiosity; and the tale of the Duchess Eliza and Bertram Vivian was told all over again. Indora listened with a deep and awe-felt interest; and in the course of some remarks which Purvis made at the conclusion, he said, "The very dagger, my lady, with which the dreadful deed was accomplished, exists still beneath this roof!"

"Is it not strange," said Indora, with a visible shudder, "that the present Duke of Marchmont should have preserved a weapon which every time he beholds it, must so frightfully remind him of the foul deed of assassination whereby he lost his uncle?"

"To tell your ladyship the truth," answered Purvis, "his Grace knows not that the weapon is still retained within these walls. It is I who have kept it: and if you were to ask me wherefore, I could not say. Heaven knows that it is through no morbid feeling of curiosity: for seldom indeed do I venture to cast a look upon that terrible weapon. But after the coroner's inquest, I found it lying in the room where that inquiry took place: no orders were issued as to its disposal; and I thrust it away in a lumber-closet. There it remained forgotten for a year or two—until the closet itself was to be pulled down in the course of certain alterations which were made within these walls. Then the dagger again fell into my hand: it was covered with rust—and a cold feeling of horror shot through me at the thought that it was my deceased master's blood which was encrusted there. Your ladyship may think it a strange fancy on my part—but I took that weapon, and with my own hand scoured the blade so that the blood-rust should disappear; and this being done, I thought of burying it in the ground, in order to put it for ever out of human sight. But another strange whim seized upon me; and I thought I would preserve it as a relic of the past,—just as in former times the armour of those who perished in battle was preserved by the families to which they belonged. To be brief, the fatal weapon has been thus preserved; and there are times when I think that in retaining possession of it I have been actuated by some higher impulse which I cannot rightly understand."

"It is singular—most singular!" said Indora, in a musing tone: "for it was not, as you have declared, through mere morbid curiosity:"—then after a few minutes' pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she added, "The horrible has its own mysterious fascinations as well as the pleasing and the beautiful: for the human heart is so constituted as to be susceptible of them. Yes—I will see that dagger. You have already told me when reciting the narrative of the tragedy, that it came from North America, and is of peculiar workmanship."

"It was brought from North America, together with other curiosities," responded Purvis, "by Bertram Vivian. If your ladyship will come this way, I will show it to you."

The old steward conducted the Princess Indora to a superbly-furnished saloon, where marble pillars and splendid draperies gave a grandeur to the scene,—and where, too, there were some beautiful specimens of sculpture. At the extremity of this saloon there was a small cabinet, containing a variety of curiosities—amongst which were those that Bertram Vivian had brought over with him from the United States. The old steward touched a secret spring in a rosewood cupboard of curious workmanship: a door flew open, revealing a single drawer; and thence he took forth the fatal dagger of which so much had just been said. With a visible tremor shooting through her entire form, the Princess Indora took it in her hand, and examined it attentively for upwards of a minute,—at the expiration of which she returned it to Purvis, who consigned it back again to the place whence he had taken it. Shutting the drawer, he closed the little door of the closet; and Indora said, "In the country to which I belong, we have articles of furniture with secret springs: but I do not understand the working of this one."

The old steward at once gave her the explanation she seemed to desire; and they then issued forth from the cabinet. It was now announced to her that dinner was served up; and she was conducted to the dining-room, where an elegant repast appeared upon the table. The liveried lacqueys were in attendance just as if it were the Duchess herself who was thus being waited upon; and indeed all possible respect was shown towards the Princess.

The repast being over—and there being still two more hours of daylight—Indora resumed her wanderings through the mansion, but on this occasion dispensing with the attendance of Purvis. She revisited the picture-gallery; and thence proceeded to the chamber where, as she had been told, the Duchess Eliza took leave of her weeping servants when about to go forth alone from that mansion where so much misery had overtaken her. In this chamber the Princess sate down and gave way to a train of mournfullest reflections,—tears even trickling down her cheeks. Then she repaired to the room which was occupied by Bertram Vivian when he was staying at Oaklands; and there again did the Princess linger in profound and painful meditation. Wherefore was she thus deeply interested in every circumstance and every scene at all associated with that tragedy of nearly nineteen years back?

From that apartment the Princess Indora roamed to the magnificent saloon where the marble columns and the rich draperies imparted an air of truly ducal grandeur, and where there were such exquisite specimens of the sculptor's art to be contemplated. But all these Indora appeared not now to notice: she seemed bent upon some purpose which absorbed every other thought and feeling. A strange light was burning in the luminous depths of her magnificent dark eyes: her lips were compressed with the decisiveness of that profound purpose of her soul; and her feet bore her straight towards the cabinet whither Purvis had previously conducted her. And now she looked around as if to assure herself that no one was by to observe her movements or watch her proceedings; and satisfied on this point, she entered the cabinet. Unhesitatingly was her taper finger pressed upon the secret spring—the little door flew open—and the next moment the dagger was in her hand. Wherefore did the Indian Princess thus again grasp that weapon with which so frightful a deed was associated? what strange feeling thus impelled her to gaze once more on the dagger that had drunk so deep of human blood?

But now a strange scene ensued. Closing the little door with its secret spring, and still retaining possession of the dagger, Indora came forth from the cabinet. Intently were her luminous dark eyes fixed upon the blade which the whimsical or else more deeply mysterious care of Purvis had kept brightly polished; and all of a sudden the Princess raised those eyes upwards, exclaiming, "It is for thee, O Lord, in thine own good time, to show whose hand did really wield this weapon to perpetrate the tragedy of that foul night!"

And it was the eye of that Deity alone to whom the eastern lady thus solemnly appealed, that beheld her as she stood there, in the midst of that sumptuously furnished saloon, with the air of a Pythoness,—one arm stretched forth, and the hand grasping the handle of the dagger—and her countenance wearing an expression of awe-felt solemnity and adjuring entreaty that was in unison with her words. How strikingly grand she looked!—her hair, dark as night, floating in luxuriant masses down her back—her superb bosom upheaved—her posture replete with tragic majesty—and her red lips apart, displaying two rows of pearls within. Wherefore did Indora send up that adjuring prayer to Heaven? why did she seem to think that there was any doubt in respect to the author of a crime which all the world had so unhesitatingly affixed to the hand of Bertram Vivian?

CHAPTER LV.

THE DAGGER.

On the following day, soon after breakfast, the Princess Indora issued forth to ramble over the domain and its neighbourhood. She had desired Purvis to accompany her; and the old man pointed out all the various features of interest: but somehow or another he found himself led on to speak again of the tragedy so intimately connected with Oaklands. The Princess Indora made him describe to her the exact personal appearance of the Duchess Eliza—that of the old Duke her husband—and that of Bertram Vivian. Purvis, naturally garrulous, was never wearied of conversing on a topic which constituted the main incident in his own experiences of life; and thus, if the eastern lady had any secret purpose of her own—or if she were merely impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity, to seek information on these points—she could not possibly have addressed herself to a person more competent or more willing to afford it.

Her wanderings with Purvis brought her towards the pond by the side of which the corpse of the murdered Duke was discovered; and there for a few minutes she lingered, gazing upon the very spot where, as Purvis informed her, he and Leachley, the late Duke's valet, had found their lifeless, murdered master.

While retracing their way towards the mansion, the discourse still continued on the same topic; and Indora seemed as willing to hear as the old steward was to impart all details, even the very minutest, in connexion with the topic which appeared to have so profound an interest for them both. Yet the Princess so shaped her questions and so phrased her remarks, that Purvis entertained not the remotest suspicion that she might possibly be impelled by some feeling stronger than mere curiosity. It was about two o'clock when they reached the mansion; and Indora, having partaken of refreshment, walked forth again into the grounds—but this time unattended by the old steward, who was wearied with his ramble of the forenoon. The Princess walked as far as the village, and passed the little inn where Bertram Vivian had his last interview with his brother—then Lord Clandon. The very room had been notified by Purvis, in the minuteness of the details which he had given the Princess; and her eyes were riveted for a minute upon the window of that room. When she pursued her way, tears were trickling from those eyes:—perchance in the natural generosity and kindness of her disposition, she was melted by the thought that within that very room a fellow-creature had endured the most excruciating anguish which the human mind could know!

In the evening the Princess Indora again had an opportunity of conversing with the old steward; and she inquired relative to the other servants who were at Oaklands at the time the tragedy took place. He gave her the same information which he had given to Christian Ashton at the time the youth was at the mansion: namely, that Leachley, the late Duke's valet, was thriving as a farmer about a dozen miles off—that Jane, the Duchess Eliza's favourite maid, had gone mad after the tragic occurrence—and that he alone, of all the domestics who were at Oaklands on the occasion of the Duke's murder, now remained there. After he had given some other particulars respecting a few of those servants who had risen in the world, he said, "And there is the present Duke's valet too—he likewise has risen; and in order to conceal his humble origin he has taken another name."

"Under what circumstances?" asked Indora.

"He has grown rich, my lady," responded Purvis. "His proper name is Travers—his assumed one is Armytage; and his daughter has married a nobleman—Lord Octavian Meredith."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Indora: "the names of Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith are not unfamiliar to me. And that Mr. Armytage, you tell me, was originally the present Duke's valet?"

"Certainly he was, my lady. When the present Duke succeeded to the title after his uncle's death, he appointed Travers to the post of bailiff; and a little time after that, Travers, it was said, inherited a considerable sum of money. So, in due course he left Oaklands; and it was many a long year before I heard anything of him again. At length Farmer Leachley went up to London on some business; and on his return into Hampshire, he came across to see me. He told me that when in London, he went to pay his respects to his Grace in Belgrave Square—and that as he was issuing forth from the mansion again, he saw a splendid equipage stop at the door, and a well-dressed gentleman alight. He thought that the face was not unfamiliar to him; and though fourteen or fifteen years had elapsed since he last saw Travers, and of course his appearance was altered by time,—yet Leachley speedily remembered where he *had* seen that countenance before; for the well-dressed gentleman descending from his chariot, was none other than Travers. The recognition was mutual: but Travers, evidently much confused, attempted to pass hastily by Leachley. Leachley however was not the man to be cut in this style: he grasped the other's arm, addressing him by the name of Travers.—'Hush, my good friend!' was the response; 'that is no longer my name. I have risen in the world, as you perceive; and you must call me Mr. Armytage. There is no harm, I fancy, in a man choosing to conceal his plebeian origin when he moves in the highest society and is the companion of the best of the aristocracy. I shall take it as a kindness, for old friendship's sake, if you will keep the little matter as secret as possible.'—Leachley assured him that he had no wish to injure or annoy him in any way—but that on the contrary he was glad to find he had such good reason for a change of name. This made Mr. Armytage, as he chooses to call himself, very civil indeed; and he invited Leachley to his house in the Regent's Park: but as Leachley was coming back into Hampshire that very day, he could not avail himself of Mr. Armytage's kindness."

"But it appears that this Mr. Leachley, of whom you are speaking," said the Princess, "failed not to communicate the secret to you?"

"Oh! there was no harm in his telling me, my lady," replied Purvis, "as I never go up to London, and therefore have no opportunity of betraying him, even if I had the inclination—which of course I have not: for there is no harm in his having changed his name—but, on the contrary, everything to his credit that he should have got on so well as to have such good ground for doing it."

By the time this conversation was ended, the Princess and the old steward had completed their ramble; and the mansion was reached. As Indora entered the hall, she perceived a certain bustle amongst the domestics, who were hurrying to and fro; and one of them, stepping up to Purvis, hastily whispered something in his ear. Indora took no visible notice of it—but ascending to her chamber, put off her walking attire, and then repaired to the drawing-room. As she entered, a tall aristocratic-looking individual rose from a sofa on which he was seated; and advancing towards her, bowed with courteous respect. For a moment—and only for a moment—there was a strange and ominous glitter in the dark eyes of Indora: but the Duke perceived it not—for it was gone by the time he raised his looks to her countenance again.

"Permit me to announce myself as the Duke of Marchmont," he said. "The Duchess and I, after mature reflection, came to the conclusion that it would be discourteous if we presented not ourselves here during at least a portion of the period of your ladyship's sojourn, to do the hospitalities of Oaklands."

"I am exceedingly flattered by this kindness on the part of your lordship and her Grace," responded Indora: and then she looked around as if in search of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Her Grace has charged me to offer your ladyship a thousand apologies," the Duke hastened to say, "that she is not enabled to present herself this evening. Her Grace is in very delicate health: the journey from London in such sultry weather has indisposed her; and on the very moment of our arrival, a quarter of an hour back, she was forced to retire to her apartment."

"And it is on my account," exclaimed Indora, with an air of vexation, "that her Grace undertook a journey which has thus indisposed her!"

"Her Grace will be completely recovered by the morning," replied Marchmont: then thinking that he might now venture upon a little compliment, in the hope of breaking the ceremonious formality of the discourse, he added, "And the pleasure which her Grace cannot fail to share with me in being honoured by your ladyship's presence here, will amply compensate for her indisposition of this evening."

Indora turned aside for a moment to take a seat: and again did that glitter, so strange and so ominous, appear in her eyes—but again too did Marchmont fail to observe it.

"I hope," he said, "that during the short time your ladyship has already sojourned beneath this roof, you have experienced every attention——"

"I ought perhaps," interrupted Indora, "at the very first moment when your Grace announced yourself, to have expressed my gratitude for your kindness and that of the Duchess in placing Oaklands at my disposal. I can assure your lordship I have been much interested——"

"I am truly charmed to hear your ladyship thus speak," exclaimed the Duke. "Perhaps you will forgive me for saying that in addition to the desire to render the hospitalities of Oaklands as acceptable to your ladyship as possible, I was anxious to hasten hither—and of course the Duchess likewise—to form the acquaintance of a lady of whom Madame Angelique spoke in such rapturous terms."

"I cannot feel otherwise than flattered," answered Indora, with every appearance of the most courteous affability, "by the kind mention which Madame Angelique must evidently have made of me."

"As Madame Angelique is a truth-speaking woman," rejoined the Duke, "she could not do otherwise than mention your ladyship in the terms which alone are appropriate. Might I be excused for expressing my surprise that a lady who is a native of a far distant clime, should be so conversant with the English tongue? Perhaps your ladyship has seen much of the English in India. But if so, how was it," he asked with a smile, "that none was fortunate enough to win a hand which a monarch might rejoice to possess?"

"I saw very little of the English in India," answered Indora, not choosing to have even the appearance of noticing the compliment with which the Duke's speech wound up.

"Perhaps, then," he continued, as if with the good-humoured familiarity which a host felt himself justified in using towards his guest, "your ladyship has visited England with a determination of subduing all hearts, and eventually bestowing the prize on the one that may seem most devoted?"

"Indeed your lordship is uselessly bewildering yourself with conjectures which are remote enough from the actual fact:"—and though Indora spoke somewhat gravely, yet her manner continued perfectly courteous. "And now," she added, "as I am exceedingly fatigued with my day's rambles, I must beg your Grace to forgive me if I retire to rest."

She rose from her seat; and Marchmont, first flying to ring the bell, next hastened to open the door. As the Princess passed, he proffered his hand: but she either did not really see it—or else affected not to perceive it; and with a courteous inclination of the head, she quitted the room. On reaching her own chamber she was attended upon by two of the female-servants of the establishment; and she remarked, as if quite in a casual way, "So you have the Duchess here now?"

"Yes, my lady," replied one of the women, at the same time exchanging a rapidly significant look with her fellow-servant.

"I hope that her Grace's indisposition is only slight?" resumed the Princess.

"There is little doubt," was the answer, "that her Grace will be quite well in the morning."

"It is to be sincerely hoped so," said Indora,—"and the more so by me, inasmuch as I am assured by the Duke it was entirely on my account her Grace undertook a journey which has thus rendered her indisposed."

Again did the two servants exchange quick looks of meaning: but Indora appeared to notice them not. They assisted her throughout her night-toilet; and when she was prepared for rest, they withdrew.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that the Duchess of Marchmont was not at Oaklands at all. This portion of the Duke's stratagem was an afterthought, and an improvement (as he considered it) upon the plan of proceedings originally laid down by Madame Angelique. He had reasoned to himself that as he was perfectly unacquainted with Indora, except by sight, it would be expedient for him to have at least an hour's interview with her ere he carried his plot into execution,—so that he might be enabled to form a better estimate of her disposition and character than he could do from Madame Angelique's description. He was moreover impatient to find himself in the presence of that eastern lady whose superb charms had made such an impression upon him on the two occasions that he had caught a glimpse of her at a distance. Thus he had come down to Oaklands for the purpose of introducing himself to Indora; and immediately on his arrival he had issued positive instructions to the domestics to the effect that they were to support his tale of the Duchess being likewise beneath that roof. This was the hint that was whispered to Purvis by one of the footmen, as the old steward entered the hall after attending Indora in her evening ramble.

And what were the Duke of Marchmont's feelings when he *did* find himself in the presence of the Princess? If he had admired her from a distance, how infinite became that admiration on beholding her close! The grandeur of her beauty exceeded even what he had expected to find it: the glory of her charms excited all his most fervid passions. It was indeed with difficulty that he could conceal the joy of anticipated triumph when conversing with her in the drawing-room. In all respects she seemed faultless in his eyes,—a being whom he would give half his fortune to possess. Marriage had consigned a charming creature to his arms—the gold of that luxurious patrician had purchased the rarest beauties of every clime, until he had grown sated with pleasure, and like the Persian monarch craved for a new one. In the Princess Indora he beheld everything calculated to ravish, to dazzle, to excite, and to fascinate: he thought there would be a world of frenzied bliss in achieving this conquest even though it were by force. He had devoured her with his eyes even while rendering the expression of his looks most courteously respectful; and when, on her retiring, he was left alone in the drawing-room, he sate feasting his imagination with the pleasure that he conceived to be in store for himself.

But let us return to Indora. When the two female-servants had retired—and even while the door was yet closing behind them—that strange glitter appeared in her eyes: and her rich red lips were wreathed with an expression of ineffable scorn. She turned towards one of the boxes she had brought with her—unlocked it—and took thence something, which she thrust under the pillow of the couch. Then she was on the point of enveloping herself in an elegant muslin wrapper, when her ear caught a gentle tap at the door; and as her glances were flung in that direction, she beheld a piece of paper thrust underneath. She hastened to pick it up, and read therein these lines:—

> "Lady, beware! A foul treachery is intended. The Duchess is *not* here: the Duke came alone. Burn this. You can guess from whom it comes—and be upon your guard."

Indora comprehended that this was an instance of the generous kindness and the honourable feeling of the old steward. She hastened to apply the paper to the wax-light; and when it had caught the flame, she tossed it into the fire-place. Then just as she was again about to put on the wrapper,—evidently with the air of one who knew what was about to happen, and meant to be in all modest decency prepared to meet the emergency,—the door opened, and the Duke hastily entered.

"Ah!" ejaculated Indora: and springing to the head of the couch, she snatched from beneath the pillow the dagger which she had placed there: then as she raised it in her right hand—her left lifting the night drapery over her bosom—she said, in a voice of resolute sternness, "You know this weapon well: it shall drink your heart's blood if you dare approach me!"

Language has no power to convey an idea of the ghastly horror which seized upon the Duke of Marchmont, as he caught sight of that dagger: his countenance became livid—he started back and then staggered as if smitten a sudden blow.

"Begone!" exclaimed Indora: and whatever were the power which she wielded at the moment,—whether it were by the mingled scorn, indignation, and defiance of her looks—whether it were by the menacing air she had assumed—or by the terrible recollections which the sight of the dagger vividly conjured up in the mind of the Duke,—certain it is that he at once obeyed her; and still pale as death, trembling in every limb, and like a conscience-stricken being, he dragged himself from the room.

Immediately afterwards the Princess Indora rang her bell violently—and then hastened to lock up the dagger again in the box where she had previously secured it. The summons was speedily answered by one of the maids who had previously attended upon her; and Indora said in a calm firm voice, "I choose not to sleep here alone: you must remain with me for the rest of the night."

Having thus spoken, she locked the door of the chamber; and placing the key under the pillow, lay down on the couch,—bidding the maid undress herself and share it with her. The young woman ventured not a single question, nor even a word of comment; she comprehended full well that the Duke had experienced an indignant repulse; and in her heart she was far from sorry—for even in the short time that Indora had been beneath that roof, her amiable manners had made a certain impression on all the domestics who had happened to come in contact with her.

Thus the night was passed by the virtuous and well-principled Indora in fullest security: but it was not as a guarantee for such security that she had insisted upon the companionship of the servant-woman. She had no fear that the Duke would renew his infamous attempt: it was in order that not the slightest breath of suspicion might tarnish her fair fame—that no whisper of scandal might have even the faintest ground to asperse her honour, that she had rung thus violently for the dependant, and commanded that dependant to remain with her throughout the night.

But how was this night passed by the Duke of Marchmont? We cannot tell. The eye of heaven alone beheld him in the solitude of his own chamber, to which—baffled, defeated, ghastly, and trembling—he retired. But to judge by his appearance when he issued from that chamber at an early hour in the morning, the night must have been a terrible one for him. He looked as if his limbs had not been once stretched upon his couch—as if his eye-lids had not for a single moment closed in slumber; so haggard and careworn was he, that he appeared as if a preternatural hand had seized upon him and hurled him in a moment a dozen years onward along the pathway of time.

On issuing from that chamber between six and seven in the morning, he bore a letter in his hand; and summoning a female domestic, bade her take the letter to the eastern lady's apartment, and bring him back the response. Its contents were limited to a few lines,—declaring that dazzled by her beauty, and infatuated to a degree that overpowered his reason, he had obeyed an impulse which was irresistible—that in the humblest terms he craved her forgiveness—and that he besought her to grant him a five minutes' interview before he took his departure, which he would do the moment that interview was over. The response which the servant brought back, was a verbal one,—to the effect that the eastern lady would grant the Duke a five minutes' interview, for the purpose of receiving the renewed expression of his contrition, in the drawing-room, and in about half-an-hour.

And during that half-hour the wretched Marchmont paced to and fro in the drawing-room,—the most restless anxiety gleaming in his eyes, and displaying itself in the quivering of his ashy lips. At length the door opened—and the Princess made her appearance. She was apparelled in a plain but neat travelling-costume,—the dress reaching up to her throat, but fitting tightly to the form, and thus displaying the superb contours of that grandly symmetrical shape. There was a certain coldness in her looks, which covered any other deeper feeling; and as she advanced into the room, she said in a voice that was as glacially emotionless as her aspect, "You wish to speak to me, my lord?"

"For heaven's sake, lady," exclaimed the miserable Duke, "tell me what I am to expect at your hands? I know the outrage was abominable——"

"But the Duke of Marchmont is capable of anything," interrupted the Princess, "where his evil passions are concerned."

"But that scene last night," ejaculated the Duke, "appeared to have——Perdition!" he vehemently cried: "I know not what to say!——I mean that it had a significancy——"

"Assuredly so," answered Indora. "It had the significancy belonging to the fixed determination of a virtuous woman to defend her honour, even though she stretched its assailant dead at her feet."

"But wherefore, lady—wherefore," asked the Duke, trembling nervously from head to foot; "did you arm yourself with that—that dagger?"

"It is the custom of my country," was Indora's cold response, "for a woman when in a strange place, to surround herself with all suitable defences."

"Then you picked up that weapon somewhere by accident—only by accident?" cried the Duke.

"Yes—by accident," was Indora's answer, still glacially given.

"But where? where?" demanded the Duke: and his scrutinizing regards were fixed keenly upon the lady's countenance, as if to penetrate whether any ulterior thought or feeling, motive or significancy, lay hidden beneath that icily dignified aspect.

"Where did I find the dagger?" she said: "it was in one of the rooms of the mansion. But why question me thus? Methought, my lord, that I was to hear the humblest apology——Yet no!" she indignantly exclaimed—and now her eyes flashed fire. "No language in the world has power to convey an excuse for such villany as yours. I will tell you frankly, my lord, that I read your purpose—I was not deceived by the miserably shallow artifice so flimsily wrapped up in the tale of your wife's arrival and indisposition. Consequently I was prepared—and you know how well!"

"But will you not pardon me? will you not pronounce the word *forgiveness*!" cried the Duke, who was evidently bewildered—indeed half-frenzied by the thoughts that were agitating in his whirling brain.

"Forgiveness? No!"—and Indora at once turned to leave the drawing-room.

"For heaven's sake, stop!" cried the Duke, hastening towards her in a supplicating manner. "If you will not grant me your pardon, at all events give me the assurance that you will do me no injury!"

"I have triumphed so effectually in the circumstances to which you allude," replied Indora, "that I need scarcely hesitate to promise that it is my purpose to keep silent in respect to your infamy. But understand me well,—that if you dare breathe a single syllable prejudicial to my honour—if it come to my knowledge that when heated with wine, and in that boasting mood which at times takes possession of all libertines, you have proclaimed the fact that I was a visitress here,—in a word, my lord, if you have the hardihood to make an allusion to me in the least way disrespectful, that moment shall I be absolved from my pledge—I will go before a magistrate—I will acquaint him with all that occurred—not even omitting"—and here Indora's dark eyes were fixed penetratingly upon the Duke—"not even omitting, I say, the circumstance how I defended myself with that self-same dagger which dealt death to the uncle whose title and fortune you inherited!"

Having thus spoken, the Princess Indora issued from the drawing-room; and the Duke, closing the door behind her, threw himself upon a sofa and gave way to his agitated reflections. In a few minutes a domestic entered, saying, "The Lady Indora has ordered your Grace's plain carriage to be immediately gotten in readiness, to take her to the nearest post-town; and she will leave Oaklands in less than half-an-hour."

The Duke gave no answer; and the domestic withdrew. Marchmont comprehended wherefore the message had been sent: it was to give him to understand that as Indora was on the point of taking her departure, it was not necessary for him to fulfil the pledge given her in his hastily written note, that he would quit the mansion immediately after the interview which he had besought her to grant.

The carriage was soon in readiness and the Princess departed from Oaklands,—having left in the hands of Purvis a liberal sum of money to be divided amongst the domestics—although the generality of them little deserved this bounty at her hands, inasmuch as they had been prepared to follow their master's instructions in respect to supporting the tale of the Duchess being beneath that roof. We may observe that munificent indeed was the present which Indora made to the steward for his own special behoof; and she had found an opportunity of expressing her thanks for the well-meant note which he had thrust under her door. But she said nothing to him in respect to the dagger.

The Duke of Marchmont beheld Indora's departure from the drawing-room window; and the instant the carriage drove away, he sped up-stairs to the room which she had occupied. He searched everywhere for that dagger—but he discovered it not: it was nowhere in the chamber. Returning to the drawing-room, he was on the point of ringing the bell with a view of putting certain questions to Purvis; but he thought better of it, and repaired to the breakfast-parlour. He had no appetite—but he was sore athirst: his throat felt as if he had been swallowing ashes. He ordered wine,—some choice specimen of the light and cooling vintage of the Rhine; and when he had partaken copiously thereof, he proceeded to his dressing-room to make some improvement in his toilet. Afterwards he wandered out upon his domain; and for hours he reflected upon all that had occurred—or we should rather say that he continued to be harassed and agitated by a variety of the most painful thoughts.

On returning to the mansion as the dinner-hour approached, he again felt an inclination to put certain inquiries to Purvis; and again was he by a second thought prevented. The dinner passed,—that dinner to which he sate down all alone; and when it was over, he again went wandering about like an unsettled spirit. When the dusk was closing in, he re-entered the mansion; and as he repaired to the drawing-room, one of the domestics preceded him with wax-lights. Then, as if his mind was suddenly made up in respect to a point on which he had so often hesitated throughout this agitated day, the Duke abruptly said to the domestic, "Bid Purvis come hither!"

In a few minutes the old steward entered the apartment: but even still the Duke felt disinclined to approach the particular topic. At length however he said, "Purvis, something so strange occurred last night, that I have made up my mind to speak to you on the subject——and yet it is so painful a one that you will not wonder I have throughout this day dreaded to approach it."

The old steward was utterly at a loss to conjecture what could have thus occurred,—though on the other hand he was scarcely at a loss to comprehend what the painful topic must be; for whenever such an allusion was made beneath that roof, it was always at once taken for granted that it referred to the tragedy of nineteen years back.

"The fact is, Purvis," continued the Duke, "I had some little design in respect to that lady: but of course that's my own affair, and nothing to do with any of my servants. I was misled as to her character—I thought she was inclined to be gay, whereas I found the very reverse to be the case. However, the point on which I desired to speak with you, may be explained in a few words. Last night, Purvis, I found that lady armed with a weapon of defence—and the weapon was——you know what I mean! It was the same identical one which my wretched brother used——"

"That dagger, my lord?" cried the old steward, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes—and I see that you know something about it!" exclaimed the Duke. "Come, tell me! Think you that it is a pleasant thing for me to have paraded before my eyes that memorial of the terrible past?"

"My lord, I am deeply sorry," said Purvis,—"but I begin to understand——"

"Explain yourself!—hasten to explain yourself! Tell me the whole truth, whatever it may be!" and Marchmont was labouring under the violent excitement of suspense.

"My lord," rejoined Purvis, "I have done nothing that I can hesitate to explain. I conducted the lady over the mansion; and amongst other places, I showed her the cabinet in which divers family relics and various curiosities are kept——"

"Yes, yes—the one opening from the grand saloon!" ejaculated the Duke. "But about that dagger?"

"It has been kept in that cabinet, my lord, for many, many years past——"

"And wherefore was it kept? who gave you such an order?"

"No one, my lord," answered the steward; "and I cannot define the feeling which has thus prompted me to keep it. It was always secured and placed out of sight in a secret drawer: I showed it to the lady for curiosity's sake—and I remember perfectly well that she questioned me as to the mode of opening that secret drawer. I saw no harm in giving her the explanation she sought——"

"Well, well," cried the Duke, stamping his foot impatiently; "it was through your folly that the weapon thus fell into her hands! But, come—let us see whether she has restored it to its place—or whether she has taken it away with her?"

"Taken it away, my lord?" cried Purvis: "she would not do such a thing as that! Indeed, I wonder that one so well-behaved——"

"Cease you prating, and come!" ejaculated the Duke: then snatching up one of the wax-candles, he hurried from the room.

Purvis followed him close; and they proceeded towards the saloon with the marble pillars, the costly draperies, and the exquisite specimens of sculpture. At the very moment the Duke of Marchmont burst in with the feverish haste which inspired him, he stopped short; and something like an ejaculation of terror burst from his lips, while his eyes were riveted in a particular direction.

"What is it, my lord?" inquired Purvis, catching the infection of the Duke's terror, but yet not comprehending the cause.

"Did you not perceive how the drapery at that end—I mean close by the door of the cabinet—was suddenly and strongly agitated?"—and the Duke's countenance was very pale as he spoke.

"No, my lord," answered Purvis; "I did not notice it. It must either have been your Grace's fancy—or else it was the wind."

"Yes, it was doubtless a draught caused by the sudden opening of this door!"—and the Duke advanced into the saloon, still carrying the wax-light in his hand.

As they drew near the cabinet, Marchmont's looks were thrown upon the drapery which he had either seen, or fancied to have seen for an instant swaying to and fro: but it was now completely still. Still there was a certain vague terror in Marchmont's soul; and he would have looked behind those hangings, were it not that he was ashamed to display his fears in the presence of the steward.

"Open the cabinet, Purvis," he said: and the order was at once obeyed. "Now let us see whether the dagger be here."

Marchmont remained standing upon the threshold in such a way that the door, as it now stood open, was between himself and the drapery which a few moments back had excited his apprehension. Purvis touched the secret spring—opened the drawer—and said, "Yes, look, my lord! the weapon is there!"

At that very instant the wax-light was dashed from Marchmont's hand; and the saloon was enveloped in total darkness. The Duke, with a loud moan, fell heavily upon the carpet; and Purvis was seized with so awful a terror that he felt as if his senses were abandoning him.

"My lord, my lord!" he at length murmured: and in the utter darkness of the place he felt his way to the Duke, who lay stretched upon the floor. Still under the influence of the direst, awfullest terror, the old steward entertained the horrible apprehension that some assassin-blow had been dealt at his master. He swept his hands over the prostrate form—inanimate too as well as prostrate: but they encountered no weapon nor oozing blood. Then Purvis ran out into the corridor—but with his hair almost standing on end as he traversed the spacious saloon; for the frightful thought was racking his mind that amidst the total darkness which prevailed, a mischief might be done by unseen hands upon himself. However, he passed without molestation into the corridor; and thence he took a lamp which was burning there. As he re-entered the saloon with the light, his glances were flung in quick nervous anxiety around: but he beheld no one except the prostrate form of his ducal master stretched near the threshold of the cabinet. On approaching nearer, he perceived that Marchmont was now recovering, and that there was no appearance about his person of any injury sustained. A long gasping moan came slowly from his lips; and raising himself partially up, he looked with wild haggard eyes around him: then as his regards settled upon the steward, he said, "Good heavens, Purvis! what could that have been? what followed when I sank down in unconsciousness?"

"Get up, my lord," cried the old steward, in a state of feverish excitement: "let us alarm the household—there must be robbers in the place!"

"No, no—be quiet!" said the Duke, now rising up to his feet: and Purvis recoiled in actual dismay from the ghastly horror which was depicted on Marchmont's countenance. "Tell me," continued the Duke, speaking in a deep hollow voice, "what did you hear? what sound did you catch? were any words spoken?"

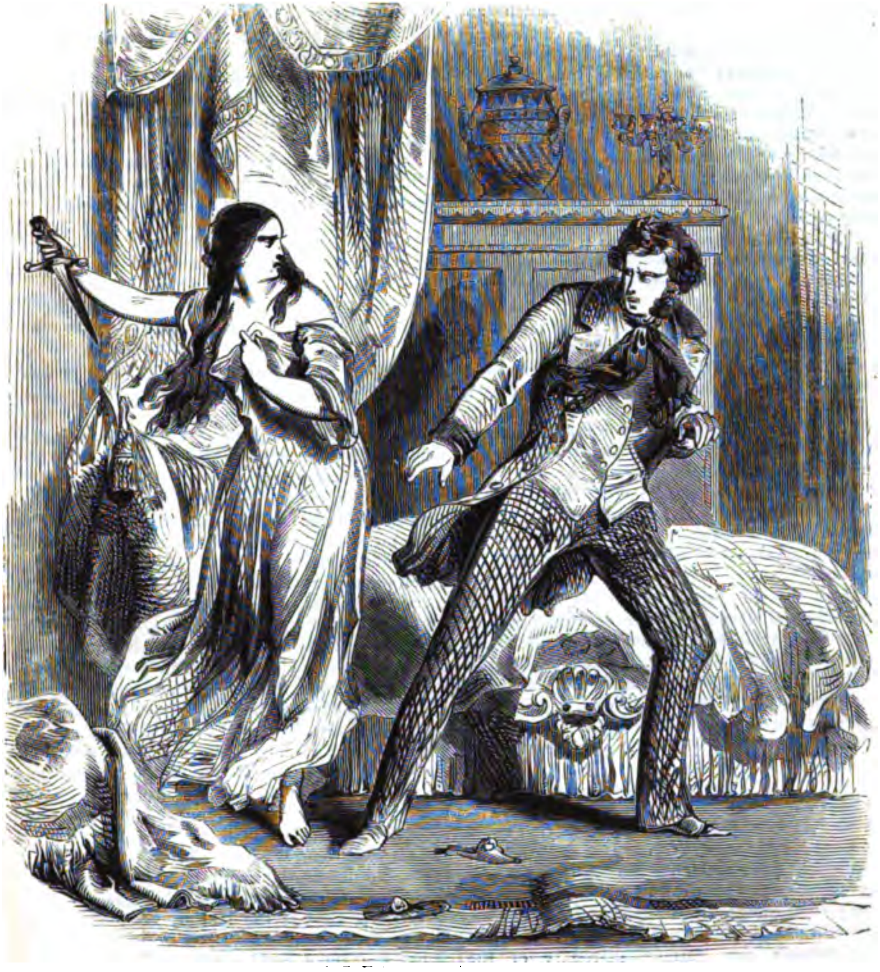
"I know not, my lord—I cannot recollect. My ideas are still all in confusion!"—and Purvis looked around him in a species of bewildered consternation.

"But you *must* recollect!" exclaimed the Duke impatiently; "you did not lose your consciousness——"

"But I well nigh lost my senses, my lord," was the steward's remark, which under less grave and fearful circumstances would have appeared ludicrous enough. "I tell your Grace there must be robbers in the mansion!—let us raise an alarm!"

"No—I command you to remain here, and to be quiet!" said the Duke sternly: and he appeared now to have almost regained his wonted self-possession. "Here—give me that lamp."

"The dagger is safe!" ejaculated Purvis, as his eyes, plunging into the cabinet, fell upon the weapon which lay in the drawer that was open; and its bright blade reflected the beams of the lamp.



"Why did you say that?" demanded the Duke, turning so sharply round upon the old man that he shrank back in affright.

"I merely thought, my lord, that some evil-disposed person might possibly have clutched at the weapon——"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Duke sternly: and with the lamp in his hand, he proceeded to examine behind all the flowing draperies which hung between the marble pillars on one side of the saloon.

But no one was to be seen: and Marchmont, again accosting Purvis, said to him, "Recollect—gather your ideas together—reflect well! Did you hear no footsteps? was there no sound of any one beating a retreat immediately after that candle was dashed from my hand? or did you catch a glimpse of any one—for you were looking towards me at the moment?—did you behold no person suddenly emerge from behind the door the instant previous to this strange occurrence?"

The steward raised his hand to his forehead, as if to steady the thoughts that were still agitating with some degree of confusion in his brain: and at the expiration of a minute, he said, "Yes, my lord,—it does seem to me that I caught a glimpse of something——"

"And that something?" demanded the Duke quickly.

"Stop, my lord! If your Grace hurries me, I shall lose the ideas which now seem to be coming back into my mind:"—and Purvis still kept his hand up to his forehead, as he slowly and deliberately gave utterance to those words. "Yes—I certainly did see something, now that I recollect. It was like a tall dark form—but I saw no face——"

"Are you sure, Purvis, that you saw anything at all?" inquired the Duke, with a strange expression of countenance: "or are these mere imaginings—the result of consternation and terror?"

"No, my lord," replied the old steward, in a tone of confidence: "now that I can collect my thoughts, I seem to have a perfect recollection that I *did* behold a tall dark form suddenly appear behind your Grace, as you stood in the doorway with your back towards the saloon and your face towards the cabinet:—then the next instant the candle was dashed from your hand, and all was utter darkness. I think I heard footsteps—but of that I am not so sure: for it was then that I was seized with such a fearful terror——"

"Let us examine the carpet!" suddenly ejaculated the Duke.

With these words, he held the lamp low down, and carefully scrutinized the carpet behind the door and likewise behind the drapery: but there were no marks of footsteps; and the steward said, "Your Grace will perceive that the pile of the carpet, although so thick, rises up again into an even surface wherever it has been trodden upon. Our own steps leave no marks."

"True!" cried the Duke: and desisting from the examination, he said in a solemn voice, "Reflect well, Purvis—examine well your recollections! Can you speak confidently as to the sounds of footsteps?"

Again the old steward raised his hand to his forehead; and after a minute's deep reflection, he said, "No, my lord—I cannot for the life of me speak with any degree of certainty upon this point. But what does it matter?—does your Grace think," asked the old man ingenuously, yet with a half appalled air of consternation, "that if there were no sounds of footsteps, it must have been an apparition?"

"Lock up that drawer and follow me," said the Duke in a low deep voice: and again did Purvis shrink back in dismay from the ghastly pallor of his countenance.

The old steward closed the drawer containing the dagger—shut the door with the secret spring—and closing the cabinet door likewise, he followed the Duke, who paced slowly and thoughtfully towards the farther extremity of the saloon.

"Purvis," he said, stopping short as he reached the door leading into the passage with which the saloon communicated, "this strange and incomprehensible occurrence——No, not incomprehensible!" he abruptly ejaculated: "for, as you yourself have suggested, it must have been some evil-disposed person who was concealed there, and who adopted that stratagem to make his escape in the darkness——But as I was about to say, we must keep this incident a secret. We should only be laughed at if we were to relate what has occurred. Do you understand me? I will not have all the gossips of the neighbourhood telling their idle tales about Oaklands,—the result of which would be that we should not get a servant to live with us; and as for visitors coming here again, it would be out of the question. So, mark me well!—it is my will that what has occurred be kept secret. Compose your looks before you go amongst the servants again this evening."

"I will attend to all your Grace's instructions," replied Purvis, who was in most instances accustomed to pay implicit obedience to the mandates of his master.

The Duke then returned to the drawing-room—while the steward repaired to his own apartment: for he felt that his countenance still wore a sufficient degree of trouble to excite the suspicions of his fellow-servants if he went amongst them at once.

By eleven o'clock the entire household had withdrawn to their respective apartments; and silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

CHAPTER LVI.

A NIGHT AT OAKLANDS.

It was past midnight; and the old steward was just sinking into that state of dreamy repose which precedes a deeper slumber,—for he had been lying awake, thinking of the incidents in the saloon,—when all of a sudden he was startled by his door opening; and a cry of terror was nearly bursting from his lips as his looks fell upon what appeared to be the countenance of a corpse. But in an instant he recognised the Duke of Marchmont, the ghastly pallor of whose face looked ghastlier still as the light of the candle which he carried streamed upon it. He had thrown his dressing-gown over his shoulders,—thus having evidently quitted his chamber in a haste too precipitate to enable him to put it on properly. The wildest horror was in his looks; and with staggering steps he advanced into the room. Closing the door behind him, he placed the candlestick on the chest of drawers, and threw himself on a seat,—his whole manner and appearance giving him the aspect of one who had just seen some hideous spectacle or passed through a phase of appalling terror.

"Good heavens, my lord, what is the matter?" asked Purvis, smitten with the conviction that something fresh of a dreadful character had occurred: "what is the matter, my lord——for God's sake, speak!"

But the Duke could not give utterance to a syllable; and still he continued to stare in wildest ghastliest horror upon the old steward, who himself was quivering throughout every nerve and fibre.

"My lord, for heaven's sake speak!—what is it? what is it?" he shudderingly asked.

"I know not—it must have been a dream!" replied Marchmont, but in a voice so deep and hollow that as it smote upon the ears of Purvis it sent forth dismay to the innermost recesses of his soul.

"A dream, my lord?" he said: "what dream could have produced this effect? Perhaps it was the result——"

"Yes—it must have been," rejoined Marchmont, but evidently with the air of one who sought to force upon himself a belief that was in antagonism with his own deeply settled conviction.

Purvis continued to regard his ducal master, whose countenance still denoted the unutterable horror and awful consternation which he had been experiencing. His eyes sank beneath the looks of the old steward: a profound sigh—or perhaps more correctly speaking, a low long moan expressive of deepest inward agony, issued from his lips.

"But what was this dream, my lord?" asked Purvis.

The Duke did not immediately answer: he was evidently uncertain whether to give an explanation or not—until at length yielding to some irresistible impulse, he said, "Listen—and I will tell you."

"Shall I procure your Grace some wine? or will your lordship take a glass of water?" inquired the old steward: for Marchmont appeared as if he were about to suffocate.

"I will help myself," was his response: and rising from his seat, he moved to where there was a decanter of water.

Filling a tumbler with hands which trembled so that the decanter and the glass jarred against each other, he raised the refreshing beverage to his lips; and it is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the water went hissing down his parched throat as if it were pouring over hot iron. Then he resumed the chair whence he had risen: but Purvis noticed that his countenance was almost as ghastly pale, though perhaps less convulsed than at first.

"Sleep was stealing upon me," he thus commenced his explanation in the same low deep voice as before,—"when I felt as if gradually awakening for some reason that I could not comprehend. I cannot remember now——indeed I knew not at the time whether it was a sound in the room, or whether a hand touched me, or whether a voice addressed me—but certain it is that I was thus unaccountably awakened from my slumber——And yet," ejaculated the Duke, suddenly interrupting himself, at the same time that he started up from the chair, "it could only have been mere fancy—and nothing else! It is useless thus to enter upon the explanation of an idle dream!"

"Yes—useless, my lord," remarked Purvis, "if the subject be painful."

"Why did you say that?" demanded the Duke, turning abruptly towards the old man as he sate up in his bed.

"My lord—my lord," stammered Purvis, who really had meant nothing more than his words had conveyed; "I—I—beg your Grace's pardon—but—but—I really——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Duke; "you see that all these things naturally render me nervous and excited——I mean that those mysterious incidents which occurred ere we went to bed——"

"They naturally made a certain impression, my lord," replied the steward. "For myself, I candidly confess that I was thinking of them until the very moment that sleep came upon my eyes."

"You said nothing about it to the servants, Purvis?" asked the Duke quickly.

"Certainly not, my lord: it was your Grace's order to the contrary."

"To be sure! It were needless to frighten them:"—and the Duke lingered in the steward's chamber with every appearance of one who was afraid to return to his own. "About this dream of mine!" he continued, after a pause, during which he first sate down—then rose up—and then sate down again, in a nervous restless manner: "about this dream of mine, Purvis——I have a great mind to go on telling you what it was."

But Marchmont once more stopped short: he evidently did not want to continue on the same topic—and yet his mind was irresistibly led by some strong influence to hover around it, painful though it were.

"I was telling you that I had fallen asleep, when something awoke me. The night-lamp was burning as usual in the room—and I looked about me, but I saw nothing. The lamp was visibly growing fainter and fainter—there was a wax-candle on the night-table upon one side of the bed—and I lighted it: but as I turned round, I beheld on the other side what seemed to me to be the tall form of a man enveloped in a cloak, and holding the cloak in such a way up to his countenance as to veil it completely from my view."

Here the Duke again stopped short,—leaving Purvis in a species of awful suspense.

"And what did your Grace do?" he at length asked as the Duke continued silent.

"To confess the truth, Purvis," was the response, "I was seized—or rather fancied I was——for of course it was all a dream——but it appeared to me in this dream that I was seized with so sudden a terror I lay like one paralyzed. It was that sort of petrifaction of the frame, though the senses were all keenly alive, which takes possession of one when under the influence of a nightmare. Then that dark shape seemed to bend down over me——Is it not extraordinary, Purvis? But if I were to tell you all, you would agree with me that it cannot be anything else than mere fancy?"

But the Duke of Marchmont was still in such a state of trembling nervousness that his condition, both physical and mental, proved how impossible it was to beguile himself into the belief that it was a dream: for again he rose from his seat—again he paced to and fro in an agitated manner—and then he sate down once more.

"A form bent, I say," he continued, still irresistibly impelled to hover around the subject, like a moth fluttering about a candle,—"it bent over me——of course in my dream, you understand? —and it spoke a few words in such a deep unearthly voice that the blood ran cold in my veins——No matter what it said—I forget—I did not hear—I could not for worlds repeat it!——Perdition seize upon me! I am losing my senses!"

The Duke stamped his foot violently upon the floor as he gave vent to that imprecation: and again springing up from the chair, he paced nervously to and fro. The old steward was seriously alarmed: for he began to suspect that his master's intellects had received a shock and were somewhat deranged. He had not failed to notice the extraordinary and incongruous expressions which had fallen from his lips in regard to the words breathed in his ear by the tall cloaked form that either in imagination or in reality had bent over him. And now too Marchmont's face was ghastly pale and as convulsed as it was when he first entered the chamber; and the old steward tremblingly asked whether he should arouse the household and send off for medical assistance?

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated the Duke, with strange vehemence: then he immediately added, "You would not have me render myself ridiculous in the presence of all the servants? It is enough that I have thus found my way to your chamber. But you will not breathe a syllable of all this? you will keep it inviolably secret? Tell me, Purvis—— tell me——"

"Yes, my lord—rest assured that I will do what you command. But about the dream?" added Purvis, hesitatingly: and his curiosity was poignantly excited.

"Ah! about the dream?" repeated the Duke: "you wish to know the rest?" and in a sort of half-bewildered manner he sank down upon the chair again. "I tell you, Purvis, that the form bent over me——I mean, you understand, that it appeared to do so——and it said some words—and it breathed a name—and that name was its own—for thus did it announce itself——And the name——"

"And the name, my lord?" repeated the steward, in the low half-hushed tone of an awe-felt suspense, as if he expected to hear that it was the name of one from the grave which had thus been spoken.

"The name?" said the Duke, gazing in a species of vacant horror and dismay upon the old man: "that name was——Bertram Vivian!"

The steward started in such a way that the whole bed shook under him; and Marchmont likewise started as if that sound itself had galvanised him with a new terror.

"Yes—it was my brother's name," he continued, in a low hollow voice; "and therefore it *must* have been a dream! For if it were not, then was it a shape from the other world——"

"Yes, my lord," rejoined the steward, in solemn tones: "for if your brother were alive, he would not revisit the seat of his crime!"

Marchmont looked in an appalled vacant horror around; and for upwards of a minute there was a profound silence in that room.

"And what followed, my lord?" at length asked the steward, who was evidently under the influence of an awe-inspiring superstitious terror.

"I hardly know," responded Marchmont wildly, "whether I fainted—whether I lay petrified and bathed in a cold perspiration—whether the object vanished suddenly—or whether I saw that dark shape issue from the chamber, opening and closing the door just as the living man would do——I cannot tell! All my thoughts are in confusion when I endeavour to concentrate them on that point! In a word, I cannot rightly remember anything more until the instant that I found myself here, in your room."

"All this is most extraordinary," said Purvis, who was wrapped in a kind of solemnly superstitious bewilderment. "If your Grace's brother be no more, wherefore should his spirit come to haunt your Grace's slumbers? But if he be alive——"

"No, no, Purvis—it was all a dream! Tell me you were sure it was naught but a dream?" and it was in a paroxysm of indescribable anguish and horror—with a countenance ghastly pale—that the Duke, hastily approaching the bed, clutched the old steward forcibly by the wrist.

"Yes—it must have been a dream, my lord," responded Purvis.

"I shall go up to London at once!" said Marchmont, with strange abruptness.

"What, my lord? leave in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, to be sure! And why not?" cried the Duke, almost fiercely. "Do I not pay hosts of servants to do my bidding? Let some of the lazy dogs rise and get the carriage in readiness!"

"But, my lord!" Purvis ventured to suggest: "possibly strange things may be said, if your Grace does this——I should be questioned——and what could I say?"

"True!" ejaculated Marchmont, who was evidently bewildered how to act.

"I know, my lord," continued the well-meaning old man, "that it must be a very painful thing for your Grace to have the recollection of long-past occurrences so cruelly revived: for I have not forgotten how dear your brother was to your lordship—and how you loved your poor uncle also——"

"Enough, Purvis!" interrupted the Duke quickly. "I will not leave to-night. But I charge you, my faithful friend—I charge you, Purvis, not to breathe a single syllable——"

"Oh, no, my lord! not for worlds. Does your Grace feel better now?"

"Yes, yes—the effect is passing off—I am almost sorry——But tell me, Purvis, do you not think I am very foolish—very weak-minded to have yielded——"

"No, my lord—not at all," answered the steward: "it was natural enough——"

The Duke of Marchmont drank another tumbler of water: and taking up the wax-candle, bade the steward good night. But as his fingers rested upon the handle of the door, he again turned towards the old man, and enjoined him to the strictest secrecy—an injunction which Purvis for the fifth or sixth time promised to obey. Then the Duke went forth: and if any one had seen him as he moved along the passages and descended the stairs leading to his own apartment, there would have been no cause to envy the lordly owner of the proud domain of Oaklands. His looks were thrown nervously about: the sounds of his own footsteps—his own shadow upon the wall—appeared to smite his very soul with a mortal terror. At length he regained his chamber; and then locking the door, he looked under the bed—behind the curtains—behind the window-draperies also: he passed into his dressing-room—into every nook and corner did he tremblingly and nervously peer, as if afraid to trust himself again to his couch unless previously assured that there was no one in his suite of apartments!

And thus, let the reader rest assured, it often and often is with the patrician dwellers in splendid mansions and in marble palaces. Their lordly titles constitute no patent to guarantee them against the same feelings—the same sensations, to which all the rest of the world are liable. Rank and riches may elevate them to the loftiest pedestals: but their souls move in the same sphere as those of the commonest herd of human beings. They belong to the same earth: they breathe the same atmosphere. Strip them of their robes, and who shall be enabled to single them out as the members of a privileged order? All these circumstances prove the hideous mockery of raising one set of persons high above their fellows. In the aristocratic heaven they may blaze like meteors: but if they fall down upon the earth they prove to be merely stones. In the eyes of man only does the distinction exist: in the eyes of heaven all are equal. The same atmosphere which is breathed by the most wretched mendicant, passes through the nostrils of a King: the same breeze which ruffles the rags of the crawling beggar, pours its tide into the saloon of beauty and fashion; and the same air also which wafts the plaintive cry of poverty, bears upon its wing the dulcet tones of melody in the drawing-rooms of the high-born and the opulent.

But to continue our tale. When the old steward was once more alone,—his chamber being left in total darkness—he pondered on all that he had heard with a kind of superstitious awe. He could scarcely think that it was all a dream on his ducal master's part. He had said that such was his impression, because he would have said almost anything to allay Marchmont's terrors, and to prevent himself from catching their infection. But he knew the Duke well enough to be certain that he was not thus to be moved by ordinary and fanciful incidents. The conviction was strong within him that he had seen a tall dark shape in the saloon whence the cabinet opened, and that this was no effect of the imagination. Might it not be the same shape which the Duke had likewise seen? But if so, was this shape a real living being? or was it one from another world? If it were the broad daylight, Purvis would no doubt have concluded in favour of the first alternative: but as it was night—he was enveloped in darkness—and still under the influence of that spectacle of horror and dismay which his master had presented to his view, he was far more prone to decide on behalf of the latter.

An hour passed; and slumber was again coming gradually over the eyes of the steward,—when he was startled by hearing the handle of the door turn. It opened—and some one entered.

"Hush!" said the individual in a low deep voice. "Fear not—it is no enemy who seeks you!"

The hair of Purvis had at first stood on end; and now, though his consternation was somewhat mitigated, he was nevertheless unable to give utterance to a word. Through the darkness of the room he beheld a form, darker than that darkness, move towards the side of his couch; and the perspiration stood cold upon his brow.

"You are Purvis?" said that same low deep voice, speaking in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes—I am he," answered the steward shudderingly. "But in the name of heaven, who are you?"

"Your master who has been hither, has doubtless told you," was the slowly given and solemn response.

"Good God, is it possible?" exclaimed the steward, starting up in his couch. "Mr. Bertram Vivian!—or rather Lord Clandon, I should say?"

"Yes—I am that unhappy being," was the rejoinder. "But compose yourself——"

"Oh, what am I to do? what am I to do?" murmured the bewildered steward: for he knew not whether to bid the long lost one avaunt as a blood-stained murderer; or whether to speak to him kindly as one who had perhaps bitterly expiated the past: for that he was innocent the old man dared not think—or else wherefore should he come thus stealthily like a robber in the dead of the night?

"Purvis," said Lord Clandon—for such was the denomination to which Bertram Vivian was entitled,—"I can judge what is passing in your mind. But if I were guilty, it would be useless to declare that long years of penitence have gone far to atone for my crime; because this much you would doubtless comprehend. On the other hand, if I be innocent, the time is not yet come when I can stand in that light before the world. Is it possible, Purvis, that you can so far forget the past—or else suspend your judgment altogether—as to bear with me a few minutes for the present?"

"Yes, yes, my lord," answered the old steward, both bewildered and affected. "What would you with me?—why come so stealthily hither?—why terrify your brother as you have done? Oh, my lord—speak, speak!"

"You must not question me, Purvis," answered Bertram, still speaking in that same low deep tone as before: while in respect to his form, it was scarcely perceptible amidst the obscurity that prevailed; and as for his countenance, no glimpse of it could the old man catch.

"Yes, my lord—there is one question that I must put!" cried Purvis vehemently: and he quivered with suspense. "That unhappy lady—the Duchess Eliza——"

"Purvis, not a syllable in respect to the past!" interrupted Lord Clandon, almost sternly. "Suffer me to question you—and answer me as if you were testifying your compassion towards a man who for many long years has drunk so deeply of the cup of bitterness——"

"My lord," sobbed the old steward, "I am moved as if I were a child!"—for his generous heart was touched by the ineffable mournfulness of the long lost one's tone. "Question me as you choose, and I will answer. But, Oh! if you could only breathe a single word to make me fancy——"

"Purvis, I always knew that you possessed a good heart," interrupted Lord Clandon; "and by everything sacred I adjure you to suspend your judgment concerning me! When to-morrow comes, look upon this visit which I have paid to your chamber, as if it were a dream. But if the conviction rest in your mind that it was a reality, then with equal solemnity do I adjure you to keep upon your lips the seal of an inviolable silence. The time may come—it must come—and shortly too—when that seal shall be lifted; and perhaps, Purvis, you may *then* rejoice that you have borne patiently and kindly with one who has known unhappiness as dire and bitter as mine!"

"Ah, my lord," sobbed the old steward, "when I look back over a number of years and think of what you were when last I saw you—young, handsome, and elegant——"

"Enough, Purvis!" again interrupted Bertram: and now his hand, seeking that of the old steward, pressed it warmly for an instant; and Purvis himself did not shudderingly withdraw that hand of his as if from the grasp of a murderer.

There was a pause of a few moments; and then Bertram said, "You will be surprised at the subject on which I am about to question you. But it is needful—it is of importance——"

"Proceed, my lord—proceed!" cried the old man, who was under an influence which strangely attracted him towards the long lost one.

"There was a lady staying beneath this roof," continued Bertram; "and though unseen myself, I beheld you walking with her."

"Yes, my lord—it was an eastern lady," answered Purvis; "and I regret to add that it was for no-honourable motive she was somehow or another led to come hither."

"But she experienced no outrage at my brother's hands?" said Bertram quickly.

The old steward hesitated for a few moments: and then he answered, "I warned her, my lord—yes, I warned her—I considered it to be my duty. She defended herself—and it was——"

But he stopped short: for he was just upon the point of adding something the bare idea of which struck him as fearful to a degree, considering the person to whom he was thus speaking.

"Finish your sentence—and deal with me frankly," said Bertram. "I have particular reasons for the questions which I am now putting, and for those which I may yet have to put."

"No, my lord—I cannot, I cannot!" murmured the old man.

"Purvis, I beseech you—nay, I implore and entreat—by all the misery I have endured——"

"Well, my lord—it was with a certain weapon ——Ah! for heaven's sake do tell me—do, for God's sake justify the wild hope which thrills in my heart! Say the one word which shall make me believe that it was not your hand——"

"Purvis, give not thus way to your feelings," interrupted Lord Clandon; "but for heaven's sake be calm and collected. I understand you. That eastern lady defended herself with a certain weapon. But how came it in her hand? Tell me, Purvis, I conjure you—tell me everything!"

Purvis proceeded to explain,—but with many self-interruptions and impassioned ejaculations, as various thoughts were excited in his mind in rapid succession,—how Indora had arrived at Oaklands—how he had escorted her over the mansion and through the grounds—how she had questioned him much in respect to the long-past tragedy—how he had shown her the fatal weapon, which he had preserved—how she had so mysteriously and stealthily possessed herself of it—how ere her departure she had restored it to the place where it was kept—how the Duke of Marchmont had questioned him on the subject—and how they had gone together to the cabinet to ascertain whether it was there, when the wax-light was so suddenly dashed from his Grace's hand. During this recital, Bertram was frequently compelled to encourage the old man to proceed—to soothe his excited feelings—to check him when he sought to become the questioner—and to induce him to extend his explanations to those details of Indora's ramble to particular spots which specially related to the tragedy of a bygone year. For upwards of an hour did Lord Clandon and the steward thus remain in conversation in the deep darkness of that chamber, until at length the mysterious visitor was about to take his departure.

"Purvis," he said, "you have rendered me a service the extent of which you may some day comprehend. But by everything sacred do I again conjure you to treat this visit of mine as if it had never taken place! Not a syllable to your master! not a word to your fellow-servants! Remember, Purvis," continued Bertram in a tone of the deepest solemnity, "for the present I am under the ban of the law—and I need but hint at what would be my fate if through any indiscretion on your part——"

"My lord," interrupted the old man, sobbing violently, "I would not do such a thing! No, I could not—even if I did not entertain that wild hope——"

"Enough!" ejaculated Bertram; and again the steward's hand was for an instant pressed in his own.

The next moment there was the sound of a door cautiously opening and shutting: all was then silent in the chamber. Sleep presently fell upon the steward's eyes; and when he awoke in the morning, he was at a loss to conjecture whether the main incidents of the past night were a reality, or whether it were all a wild and fanciful dream.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE DUKE.

It was evening—the evening of the day which followed the incidents of the memorable night depicted in the previous chapter; and Madame Angelique was seated as usual in her elegantly furnished apartment, when the Duke of Marchmont was announced. She had little expected to see him so soon: but she rose from her seat with the conviction that she might congratulate him on his success with the oriental lady,—when she stopped short on beholding the extraordinary expression of his countenance. It was pale and careworn: there was a restless trouble in the eyes—and it was also evident that he had been drinking.

"What in heaven's name is the matter, my lord?" she asked; seized with consternation lest she herself should become involved in some dilemma with respect to the machinations which she had now no doubt had resulted in failure.

"Perdition take me, and everybody as well as everything else!" said the Duke, flinging himself upon a seat. "Give me a glass of wine. No—a tumbler! Fill it up to the brim—spare not your champagne!"

"But, my lord, do tell me," said Madame Angelique, her countenance turning so deadly pale that the rouge sate like plastered patches upon it,—"do tell me——"

"The wine, I say!" ejaculated Marchmont fiercely.

With trembling hands Madame Angelique filled a tumbler with champagne; and the Duke tossed it off at a draught.

"There!" he said, endeavouring to force himself to laugh with an air of gaiety; "now I am cheered. It is astonishing what admirable effects are produced by wine—delicious wine!"

"Pray tell me, my lord, what has occurred?"—and the infamous woman was still quivering with suspense.

"All your precious schemes resulted in nothing," responded Marchmont,—"or in something much worse than nothing: for my discomfiture was complete—my failure signal——perdition take it!"

"And will there be any evil consequences? does she threaten law?" demanded Madame Angelique, quickly.

"No, no—we are safe enough upon that score," rejoined the Duke.

"Then wherefore look so wild? why appear thus troubled? Your Grace has frightened me so——"

"I scarcely know what is the matter with me," answered the Duke. "I too have been frightened——But no, no—that is all nonsense on my part——In a word, I don't know what I am saying. Give me more wine!"

"Pardon me, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "but I really think you have taken enough."

"Why, you old wretch!" he exclaimed angrily: "it is wine bought with my money, I'll be bound!"

"Well, well, my lord, pray do not get out of temper:"—and she filled him a tumbler accordingly.

"This is the elixir that makes man forget his cares and drowns thought!" cried the Duke, affecting a hilarious mood—but it was a feeble and sickly endeavour. "There!" he added, "that cheers me—that inspires me!"—and yet an almost ghastly expression of care and anguish swept over his features.

Madame Angelique gazed upon him with mingled terror and astonishment. She knew not what to think. In spite of the assurance he had given her, she still laboured under the apprehension that some trouble would arise from their defeated projects in respect to Indora.

"What ails your Grace?" she asked in an agony of suspense: "there is something unnatural in all this!"

"If you said that there was something extraordinary and incomprehensible in the eastern lady's conduct, you would be right enough," responded Marchmont. "Instead of finding one who was to be easily vanquished——"

"I never told your Grace that the conquest would be an easy one," interrupted Madame Angelique. "I warned you that she was a paragon of virtue——"

"A dragon you might have said," replied Marchmont bitterly: "for when I found my way to her chamber, she brandished a dagger in my face:"—and again did an expression of ghastly horror sweep over his countenance.

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, almost contemptuously, "and were you not prepared for resistance? What! you, a man, to be frightened at a dagger in the hands of a woman?"

"Perdition take you, old beldame!" vociferated the Duke fiercely: "how dare you make your insolent remarks upon my conduct?"

"I crave your Grace's pardon," cried Madame Angelique, with an air of frightened humility. "I only fancied that I had prepared your Grace sufficiently to expect some degree of resistance——"

"Silence—and listen!" interrupted the Duke sharply: then with another attempt to affect a gay and hilarious mood, he burst out into a laugh, saying, "Come, my dear madam, I was only jesting—I did not mean to offend you: but your good wine has put me into such spirits—ha! ha!" and there was sickliness and feebleness in his forced merriment.

"Well, my lord, the scheme failed—no matter how. But why—why," asked Madame Angelique urgently, "has it affected you thus?"

"There is a mystery which must be cleared up," was the Duke's response; "and you alone can undertake the task. Indora had some ulterior motive which you never penetrated. She is not the credulous inexperienced creature you take her for. She had some design in going to Oaklands: and what that design was, you must discover. A thousand guineas if you succeed: but if you fail, you shall never again see me cross your threshold. This is plain English: do you comprehend it?"

"I do, my lord—but I am perplexed and bewildered:"—and the woman's looks justified her words. "What earthly motive could the lady have had——"

"*That*, I tell you," exclaimed the Duke passionately, "is what you must find out. While this lady was at Oaklands, she was asking a thousand questions—prying into all sorts of things—troubling herself with matters which one would have fancied to be scarcely known to her at all,—in short, Madame Angelique, she had some deep design—of *that* I am convinced!"

The infamous woman reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute; and then she said, "The only way in which I can possibly learn anything, is through the ayah Sagoonah: but as I have previously informed your Grace, she is a woman of a few words——"

"Lavish gold upon her—and it will loosen her tongue," ejaculated Marchmont. "You have brought me into all these perplexities—and it is for you to extricate me——perdition take them!"

"I really am at a loss to comprehend your Grace," said Madame Angelique, with an air of the most unfeigned surprise. "So long as this eastern lady does not threaten us with law-proceedings, or seek to punish us for anything that has taken place, what earthly reason has your lordship to apprehend that her visit to Oaklands can involve you in any peril?"

"No matter!" exclaimed the Duke: "there is something sinister in that lady's proceedings—and I cannot get it out of my mind that so far from being your dupe, she made a tool of you. Pray try and recollect the precise terms in which the subject of that visit to Oaklands was first introduced."

Madame Angelique again reflected for a brief space; and then she said, "Well, I do remember that it was of her own accord she remarked that she had heard of your beautiful seat at Oaklands and should like much to see it. I had just mentioned your Grace's name as if quite accidentally, when she made that observation——"

"It is as clear as daylight!" exclaimed the Duke angrily: "you have been outwitted—and I am the victim!"

"The victim, my lord! But how? Your Grace really makes me half inclined to think that there is something more than you suffer me to know; and unless you give me the fullest explanation, it is impossible for me to fathom this mystery."

"You have got nothing to do," returned Marchmont, "but to learn that lady's motive for wishing to pay a visit to Oaklands. It was not through mere curiosity—of *that* I am well convinced. There are hundreds of beautiful country-seats; and wherefore should she thus have pitched upon mine? Besides, I tell you that I saw enough of her to convince me that so far from being inexperienced in our habits, manners, and customs, she is in every way as civilised and accomplished a woman as any English lady in the land."

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "I will lose no time in seeing what Sagoonah the ayah can do for me."

"Be it so," responded the Duke: and having quaffed another tumbler of wine, he took his departure.

On returning to his mansion in Belgrave Square, the Duke of Marchmont learnt that Mr. Armytage was waiting to see him. An expression of annoyance passed over his countenance: but he repaired to the room where Zoe's father was seated. Composing his looks in as amiable a manner as he possibly could, he gave Armytage his hand,—saying, "Well, what brings you hither at half-past ten o'clock at night?"

"I regret to say," replied Armytage, "that I am compelled to beg a boon——"

"What! another?" ejaculated the Duke, utterly unable to repress his anger and annoyance. "But of course," he added hastily, "it is not of a pecuniary character?"

"Indeed, my lord," responded Mr. Armytage, "I am sorry to say——"

"But what the deuce is coming over you, my good fellow?" exclaimed Marchmont. "You who for years were so prosperous, have of late appeared to be going altogether in the contrary direction."

"I hope and trust, my lord," responded Armytage, "that it is merely a temporary inconvenience which I am suffering——I shall put myself right shortly."

"Ah! so you told me six or seven months ago, when I lent you fifty thousand pounds—which, I need not remind you, have never been repaid."

"It is perfectly true, my lord," answered Zoe's father, growing more and more doggedly decisive in his tone: "but it is not the less certain that if I do not have twenty-five thousand pounds to-morrow by midday, I shall be a ruined man."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds, Travers!" ejaculated the Duke.

"Hush, my lord!—that name!" said Armytage hastily.

"Perdition take the name!" cried Marchmont, as if driven almost to desperation.

"And yet methinks," said Armytage coldly, "it was not altogether without your Grace's concurrence—and in some sense by your counsel—that I abandoned it."

"Well, well—but about this money which you require?" rejoined the Duke, petulantly. "It is altogether out of the question—I cannot afford it —I——"

"And I, my lord," answered the other decisively, "cannot afford to be ruined."

"But how is all this?" demanded the Duke.

"When I applied to your Grace for the fifty thousand pounds," responded Armytage, "I informed you that I had suffered materially by that scoundrel Preston, who commited forgeries to such a large amount. During the past six months I have been endeavouring to retrieve my losses: but somehow or another fortune has set in steadily against me—and I have only incurred fresh ones."

"And what chance have you of improving your position?" demanded the Duke. "I thought you told me when I lent you the former amount, that you had numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of a short time?"

"And so I had, my lord," replied Mr. Armytage: "but——"

"But what? Has that money all gone likewise?"

"There is no use denying the truth," rejoined Armytage: "the fact is, I have been exceedingly unlucky—and if I do not pay this sum of twenty-five thousand into my banker's hand to-morrow to meet certain bills that will be due, I shall be a ruined man. On the other hand, if your Grace will assist me, I can immediately procure fresh pecuniary accommodation——"

"Then you will have to borrow in order to be enabled to go on?" exclaimed the Duke.

"Yes: but fortune is sure to take a turn. In a word, my lord, I am deeply interested in a splendid speculation which only requires money to float it on to complete success."

"Then you, a money-lender," cried the Duke, "are now in the hands of money-lenders?"

"It is a highly respectable solicitor who is assisting me," rejoined Armytage—"a Mr. Coleman, of Bedford Row, Holborn. The fact is, he has advanced me this twenty-five thousand pounds which I have got to pay to-morrow; and if my bills be all taken up, I can go to him with the certainty of obtaining fifty thousand."

"But out of that fifty thousand," said the Duke, "would you pay me back the twenty-five you wish me to advance?"

Armytage hesitated for a moment—and then said, "Yes, my lord—I will:" but it was in a way as if he thought to himself that if he did repay the sum he could speedily have it back again in case of need.

"I do not think, Travers, that you would deceive me——"

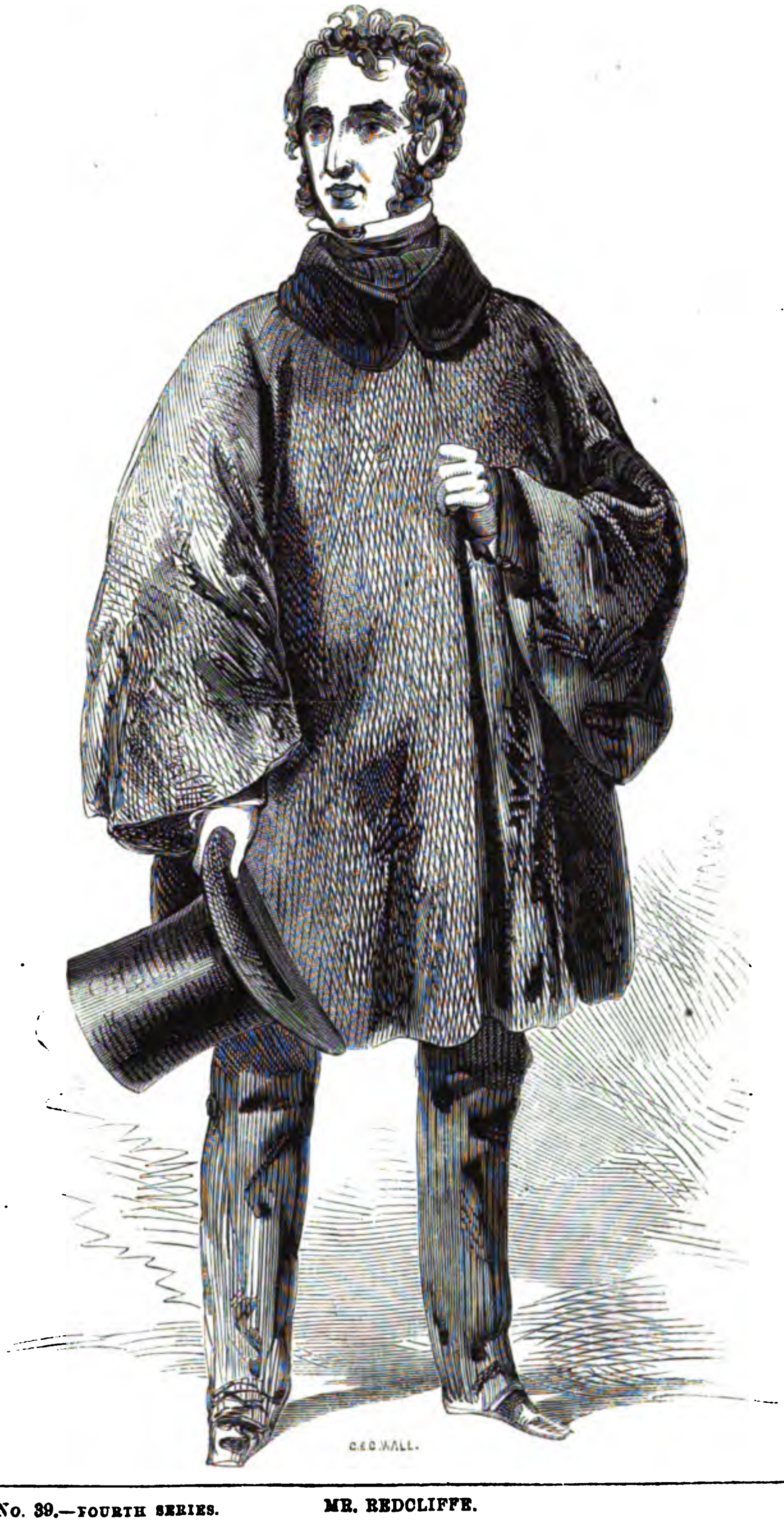
"Pray, my lord, be careful about that name! I don't know how it is, but of late your Grace has frequently dropped it inadvertently."

"Yes—I am afraid I have," answered the Duke, in an abstracted manner. "Well, come to me at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and you shall have the amount. But remember, it is to be repaid in the course of a few days: for if not, it would put me to a serious inconvenience. And pray, Armytage, mind what you are about—or you will ruin yourself. Do your daughter and her husband know of these difficulties?"

"Heaven forbid, my lord!" replied Armytage. "Zoe has gone abroad."

"Gone abroad?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Of course her husband has accompanied her——"

"No—she has gone alone—that is to say, with only two female servants."



MR. REDCLIFFE.

"And what is the meaning of this?" cried the Duke: "you don't intend me to understand that she is separated from her husband?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," returned Armytage. "Meredith was most anxious to accompany her: but she begged and implored that she might go alone. Her health has been failing for some little time past; and the physicians ordered her to visit a more genial clime. Meredith and I were compelled to let her have her own way: for if we had refused it would only have agitated her and rendered her worse. I think that she is the least thing inclined to be fanciful—not exactly hypochondriacal—but she has got it into her head that a few months' complete seclusion in the south of France or in Italy will put her completely to rights."

"Then, in that case," observed the Duke, "it was much better to let her have her own way."

"This is what I represented to Meredith," said Mr. Armytage: "but I had a great deal of trouble in persuading him to consent. He is dotingly fond of Zoe—she assures me that nothing can exceed his love for her—and she would be completely happy were it not for this nervous illness of her's."

After a little more conversation, Mr. Armytage took his leave: and when he was gone, the Duke, on examining his banker's book, experienced the most bitter vexation on finding that the cheque which he had promised to give on the morrow would considerably over-draw his account. The Duke's credit was however good; and consequently there was no difficulty in the way of his compliance with Mr. Armytage's exorbitant demand.

On the following day, at about eleven in the forenoon, Madame Angelique, apparelled in her plainest garb, proceeded to Bayswater, and walked about in the neighbourhood of the Princess's villa. She presently saw Mark, the faithful intendant or major-domo of the household, issue from the dwelling: she pretended to be walking towards the main road, with the air of a person who had a settled and legitimate object in view; and thus she watched him until he entered an omnibus. When the vehicle was out of sight, she retraced her steps towards the neighbourhood of the villa; and in a few minutes she beheld Sagoonah in the garden. Approaching the fence, she gave a peculiar cough, which at once reached the ayah's keen ear: and the latter proceeded towards a spot where, shrouded from the view of the windows of the dwelling, she could converse with Madame Angelique.

"Your mistress has returned," she said to the ayah,—"has she not?"

"Yes—she came back the day before yesterday," replied Sagoonah. "What was done?"

"Not that which we anticipated," rejoined Madame Angelique. "Your mistress possessed herself of a dagger, and so terrified the Duke that he fled away from her presence."

"Then your Duke," answered Sagoonah, her superb eyes flashing fire and her vermilion lips wreathing with ineffable scorn, "was a poor paltry coward. Why do you seek me again?" she demanded almost fiercely.

"Has the Lady Indora said nothing to you in order to account for her absence?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Nothing," replied the ayah. "It is not probable that a great lady such as she is, would enter into familiar discourse with her slave on a subject she would of course rather avoid."

"And is it impossible for you to draw her into conversation?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Impossible on that point, I feel convinced," answered Sagoonah. "But can you think I shall attempt to serve you further when you throw away such golden opportunities?"—and there was so sinister a light shining in the depths of her lustrous eyes, that the wily Frenchwoman was strangely struck thereby.

"Sagoonah," she said, as a suspicion arose in her mind, "I think that it was not for the sake of the gold alone you undertook to serve my purpose?"

"And wherefore do you think *that*?" asked the ayah coldly.

"Because there is a visible feeling of annoyance on your part at the failure of the enterprise. You *wished* your mistress to succumb to the Duke of Marchmont?"—and Madame Angelique fixed her eyes keenly upon the countenance of the ayah.

"Explain yourself more fully," said Sagoonah, still with a cold and unruffled demeanour.

"Perhaps you have reason to dislike your mistress?" suggested Madame Angelique; "and you therefore aided in a scheme which was to effect her ruin. In a word, you were inspired by a hope of vengeance?"

"No—not vengeance!" murmured the ayah, now all in an instant becoming profoundly agitated. "My mistress has ever been kind to me: but there is something *here*"—and she laid her hand upon her heart—"which seems to be an evil spirit prompting me to dreadful things!"

"It is as I have said," resumed Madame Angelique: "you have some bitter feeling in respect to your mistress—and therefore you aided in the hope of working her ruin?"

"Woman," replied Sagoonah fiercely, "the evil spirit has thrown you as a temptress in my way. Would that I had never seen you!—or else that your plans had been effectually carried out! For now I have all the remorse of an evil deed, without the satisfaction of knowing that it was accomplished."

"Do not reproach me," said Madame Angelique, in that voice of cajolery which she knew so well how to assume; "but let us converse reasonably together. Ah!" she ejaculated, as another suspicion struck her: "perhaps you wish to be introduced to one of those fine gentlemen of whom I have spoken to you—but you are afraid to fall unless your mistress has first set you the example?"

"Dare you think," asked Sagoonah, her eyes again flashing fire, "that impure thoughts harbour in this bosom of mine?" and with a mechanical gesture she partially drew aside the snow-white drapery from her swelling bust. "No, no!—and if for a single instant I suffered you to imagine that I was merely yielding a preference to my mistress in respect to your vile purposes, it was simply because I did not *then* choose to enter into the slightest explanation with you. But rest assured that if I were brought into the presence of any one of the fine gentlemen to whom you have alluded—and if it were for an improper purpose—I would not be content with the mere brandishing of a dagger, as you say my mistress was—but I would plunge it deep down into the villain's heart!"

As the ayah thus spoke, her eyes kept flashing continuous fires—her nostrils dilated—her bosom swelled—and she drew that bayadere form of her's up with so queen-like an air, that her whole demeanour astonished and terrified Madame Angelique.

"There is some strange mystery in all this!" thought the infamous woman to herself: and she was bewildered how to act. At length she said, "My dear Sagoonah, you treat me most singularly—most unkindly! Are we not to act together?"

"In what way?" demanded the ayah, who had all in a moment become calm and collected again. "If I still sought the ruin of my mistress, there is no means of effecting it: for the chance to which I helped you has been flung away in the most dastard manner."

"Can you not possibly ascertain the real motive which induced the Lady Indora to visit Oaklands? That is all I now require," continued Madame Angelique: "and I will lavish gold upon you if you succour me in my aim."

"Do you fancy, then," asked Sagoonah, fixing her dark eyes penetratingly upon Madame Angelique, "that the Lady Indora made use of you as an instrument to further her own views, instead of herself becoming your dupe and your victim?"

"Yes," exclaimed Madame Angelique: "that is the very opinion which the Duke of Marchmont himself expressed, and which I now hold."

Sagoonah reflected profoundly for several minutes, during which so fixed was her gaze downward—so grave and unruffled was her countenance—that Madame Angelique could not form the slightest conjecture as to what things she was revolving in her mind. At length the ayah slowly raised her head; and again fixing her looks with an earnest but unfathomable expression upon the Frenchwoman, she said, "Then the Duke of Marchmont is afraid?"

"The conduct of the Lady Indora," replied Madame Angelique, "was of a character to engender vague and mysterious apprehensions——"

"Of what?" asked Sagoonah quickly.

"I know not," responded Madame Angelique, really bewildered by the question. "Perhaps the Duke imagines that a lady visiting his country-seat under such extraordinary circumstances, and conducting herself so singularly as she did, must have some hidden motive which is full of vague and ominous portent."

"And it is!" rejoined Sagoonah: then again fixing her luminous dark eyes with a strange significancy on Madame Angelique, she added, "Rest assured that if the Duke of Marchmont do not most effectually ruin the Lady Indora, she will prove the ruin of him! Let this warning suffice:—and now I charge you that you come hither to seek me no more!"

"One word, Sagoonah—and only one word!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, terrified by the ayah's solemnly given warning: for at the moment she could think of no ruin which might overtake the Duke without involving herself at the same time; because she could not fancy that whatsoever mischief which Indora had it in her power to achieve, was in any way apart from an invocation of the law's vengeance on those who had endeavoured to beguile her to her destruction.

Sagoonah was hastily turning away when she had given utterance to her words of warning: but at that entreaty of Madame Angelique she stopped short,—saying, "What would you yet with me?"

"You have told me," responded the Frenchwoman, "that ruin will overtake the Duke if Indora herself be not ruined. In case of need, may I again rely upon your services?"

Sagoonah reflected deeply for a few instants—and then said, "To-morrow, at this same hour, I will be here."

Having thus spoken, she passed hastily away; and her white raiment was lost to Madame Angelique's view amongst the dense foliage of the garden

CHAPTER LVIII.

MR. SHADBOLT.

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock in the evening, we shall again find the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique closeted together in the luxuriously furnished sitting-room which the latter was wont to occupy. The infamous woman had explained to the Duke all which passed between herself and Sagoonah; and Marchmont was deeply agitated thereby. Madame Angelique had not as yet questioned him as to the particular cause of this trouble—for she thought that she more or less knew it, and that it concerned herself as much as him: but she presently said, "How was it that your Grace assured me last evening that we had nothing to apprehend in the shape of exposure or law-proceedings?"

"I scarcely know what I said," he answered. "You saw that I was excited and bewildered——"

"But what can she do?" demanded Madame Angelique nervously.

"If she were to lay an information before a magistrate," returned the Duke, "you would at once be arrested: and though the privilege of the peerage would save me from the same extent of ignominy that would overtake you, yet the exposure would be terrific for me likewise."

"And yet," cried Madame Angelique, as a remembrance smote her, "the ayah never told me that the Princess meditated *my* ruin! And then, too, I cannot understand why Indora should have gone prying and peering into the affairs at Oaklands, as your Grace last night informed me she had done. After all, my lord," added the woman, clinging to the hope which had thus sprung up within her, "I think that it is your Grace who somehow or another has *alone* cause for apprehension."

"You think so?" said the Duke: and a strange expression passed over his countenance. "Listen, Madame Angelique," he continued to observe, "you do not know these eastern women—it is impossible to fathom their designs. They are stealthy and treacherous as the serpents which belong to their native clime. Sagoonah's warning is not to be neglected! Rest assured that the Princess Indora is terribly vindictive——"

At this moment a domestic entered, and whispered something in the ear of Madame Angelique.

"Very good," said the woman: "I will come in a moment."

"What is it," asked the Duke, when the servant had withdrawn.

"A gentleman who has just entered the saloon from M. Bertin's house," was the response.

"Then pray get rid of your patron, whoever he is, as soon as possible," said Marchmont, in a tone of visible ill-humour: "for our conversation is of much greater moment just at present than any visits in the way of business."

"I will not be many minutes absent," responded the Frenchwoman. "It is doubtless a stranger—one of neighbour Bertin's recommendation—and I am bound to be courteous and civil towards him."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from her private apartment, leaving the Duke by himself there; and she proceeded to that saloon which on former occasions we have described. None of the young ladies were there at the moment: but she saw that the individual who had just been introduced thither, was carefully examining the mirror-contrived door. He was handsomely dressed: but the keen experienced eye of Madame Angelique at once detected that he was not a gentleman, in the common acceptance of the term. Indeed, there was something vulgar in his appearance; and he did not seem accustomed to the elegant apparel which he had on. A suspicion of evil flashed to the mind of the infamous proprietress of the establishment: but putting on a smiling countenance, she accosted the visitor,—who had been so absorbed in examining the mirror-contrived door, that he had not in the first instance noticed her entrance from the opposite side of the room.

"You are Madame Angelique?" he said.

"I am," was the response; and she affected to smile with the utmost affability.

"Well, ma'am," rejoined the man, "and I am a detective officer."

A faint scream burst from the guilty woman's lips—and she felt as if she were about to faint: for in that announcement there was something terrible to her ears and fraught with direst apprehension to her soul.

"But do not alarm yourself," he almost immediately resumed; "for I come in quite a friendly manner."

Infinite was the relief produced by this second announcement; and Madame Angelique instantaneously began to overwhelm her visitor with attentions. She made him sit down at the table—she produced wine and other refreshments from the amply supplied side-board—and her visitor appeared well inclined to do justice to them.

"You are an amiable woman, Madame Angelique," he said, having tossed off his second bumper; "and I could not find it in my heart to hurt you. My name, ma'am, is Shadbolt. Perhaps you may have heard it before?"

"I cannot say I recollect it," answered Madame Angelique. "But do explain what brought you hither?—for I am still so agitated and excited——"

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt: "you have no reason to be afraid. The truth is," he continued, making an inroad into a sponge-cake by means of a silver knife, and then immediately applying the same instrument to a melon, out of which he cut a huge slice,—"the truth is, ma'am, certain information has been given to the police——"

"By whom?" asked Madame Angelique eagerly; and she was trembling from head to foot.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell," replied Shadbolt. "All I know is that by some means or another an intimation was conveyed to the Commissioners of Police this very day, that your establishment was of such and such a description—of course, ma'am, I don't like to make indelicate allusions. By goles, this sherry's first-rate—and the port's stunning!"

"The Commissioners of Police!" murmured the wretched Madame Angelique: "what will become of me?"

"Nothing unpleasant, if you only listen to me," answered Mr. Shadbolt. "It was lucky for you, ma'am, that I was appointed to look into the little matter: for if it had been any other of the detectives, you would have found yourself in Queer Street, and no mistake. But I, my dear madam, am an exception to the rule: I know what gentility is—and I wouldn't think of acting harsh towards a lady of your——" he was about to say "respectability," but he thought he had better use the word "generosity"—and he substituted it accordingly.

"I cannot be too grateful to you," exclaimed Madame Angelique, to whose mind an immense relief was imparted by the praises which Mr. Shadbolt sang of himself.

"You see, ma'am," continued this individual, who was most impartially dispensing his attention to all the wines, fruits, and cakes upon the table, "the information which was sent to the Commissioners described how your neighbour, the French tailor, has a pleasant little understanding with you—and how a well-dressed person, by whispering a word in M. Bertin's ear, to the effect that he has got an appointment with a lady in your house, could at once obtain admission;—and I must do you the justice, ma'am, to observe that of all the neat, compact, and useful contrivances I ever saw, that looking-glass door beats them all into fits!"

"Good Heaven, then, the secret is known to the Commissioners?" gasped Madame Angelique.

"You ought to console yourself," replied Mr. Shadbolt, "by the reflection that it is a wonder it should have been kept a secret so long."

"And what will you do to help me? how will you serve me as a friend?" asked the Frenchwoman eagerly.

"It all depends, ma'am," was the response. "Every thing has its price. No reflections, ma'am—but you have your price for the pleasant little accommodation you furnish here; and without being more personal than is absolutely necessary, I may add that I, Isaac Shadbolt—or honest Ike, as I am generally called—have my price also?"

"Anything,—everything, if you will only shield me!" said Madame Angelique, in a flutter of mingled hope and suspense.

"Come, ma'am—fifty guineas won't hurt you?"

"A hundred!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, her generosity becoming lavish in proportion to the amount of peril that was to be averted.

"I think I said a hundred," observed Shadbolt coolly: "but at all events we'll make it so."

Out come Madame Angelique's purse: with a nervous hand she counted down what she conceived to be five bank-notes for twenty pounds each—but one happened to be for fifty; though when Mr. Shadbolt reckoned them over with an air of easy indifference, he did not consider it necessary to draw her attention to the little oversight.

"And now, ma'am," he said, "I tell you what must be done. I shall make my report to-morrow—and it will be to the effect that though there certainly is that looking-glass door of communication, yet that you have given up the business, and you are now devoting yourself altogether to the millinery line. I shall add too that I contrived to learn that the looking-glass door is to be walled up——"

"And so it shall be!" cried Madame Angelique. "Anything—anything——"

"Don't be foolish ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt, having tossed off his ninth or tenth bumper: "you needn't do anything of the sort. Only be more careful in future—don't let that French tailor suffer a soul to pass through his house unless he knows he is all right—pay me a cool hundred every year—and you may go on driving as roaring a trade as ever."

"Then you do really think that for the present there is no danger?" said Madame Angelique.

"Not an atom of it, if you follow my advice. Honest Ike Shadbolt is not the man to deceive a lady of your respec——generosity, I mean. And now, ma'am, I'll be wishing you good night."

Mr. Shadbolt, having consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, lingered to drink one more glass of wine to the lady's health—then just one more to his own—then a last one to the highly philanthropic sentiment of "Here's better luck!" He was then advancing towards the mirror-contrived door with a somewhat unsteady pace, when Madame Angelique said, "Have you really no idea who gave the information to the police? Do you think it was a lady?"

Mr. Shadbolt had in reality no more idea than the man in the moon: but under the influence of the wine and the circumstances, he thought it necessary to appear knowing; and he therefore said, "Well, ma'am, betwixt you and me and the post, you are not very far wrong."

"Ah, I see you know more than you have chosen to tell me!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Pray be candid——"

"Well, you see, ma'am, it would not exactly do for us secret officers to tell everything we do know."

"It *was* a lady, then!" cried Madame Angelique. "Was it—was it a lady at—at—Bayswater?"

"Well, if you push me into a corner," answered Shadbolt, with a look of tipsy knowingness, "it was:"—but let the reader understand well that the fellow was in reality in entire ignorance respecting the source of that information which had been sent to the Commissioners of Police.

He took his departure; and Madame Angelique hastened back to the room where she had left the Duke of Marchmont. Although the matter had ended satisfactorily to a certain extent, and even more so than she had at first dared hope when the terrible term "detective officer" smote upon her ears,—yet she was still labouring under a considerable degree of agitation; and the Duke of Marchmont was instantaneously struck by her appearance.

"Something new?" he exclaimed petulantly. "Misfortunes never come alone: they strike us blow upon blow. But what is it?"

Madame Angelique explained everything that had taken place,—not forgetting to add how she had wormed out (as she really believed she had done) the admission from Isaac Shadbolt that it was a lady at Bayswater who had given the information to the Police Commissioners. This piece of intelligence astonished Marchmont. Indora had given him to understand, when at Oaklands, that there would be no exposure; and this assurance he had considered to include an equal exception of Madame Angelique from the wreaking of vengeance. In fact, he had not really dreaded law-proceedings or any such signs of Indora's wrath at all,—though on this evening of which we are writing, he had suffered Madame Angelique to believe the contrary, simply because he sought to work upon her fears, bend her to his purpose, and induce her to combine with him in some plot against the eastern lady. But from the intelligence he had just received, it appeared to be unquestionable that Indora was positively setting herself to work to inflict chastisement upon Madame Angelique.

"But how on earth," he exclaimed, "could Indora have obtained an insight into the mysteries of your establishment?"

"That is what puzzles and bewilders me," responded the infamous woman. "Oh! I wish—I wish I had never had anything to do with those orientals!"

"You see, my worthy friend," answered the Duke bitterly, "that we are both of us involved in the most alarming perplexities. Just now you were flattering yourself that Indora did not mean to include *you* in her vengeance——"

"She has already begun!" said Madame Angelique; "and I tremble lest it should not end there."

"End there?" exclaimed Marchmont: "it would be preposterous to indulge in such a hope. I tell you that these eastern women are as vindictive as tigresses and as cunning as serpents. We have become the objects of this vengeance and this subtlety——"

"What is to be done?" cried Madame Angelique, literally shaking herself in her mingled spite and despair.

The Duke looked her hard in the face, and said, "Did you not ask Sagoonah whether she would again serve you? did she not confess that she has some feeling, no matter what, that prompts her to yearn for the ruin of her mistress? and has she not consented to meet you in the forenoon of to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes — this is true enough," replied Madame Angelique. "But what can we do?"

"What idea had you in your head," inquired Marchmont, "when you asked if she would again assist you?"

"I had no fixed idea—I had not thought of anything—I was perplexed and bewildered at the time—frightened too——"

"And yet," rejoined Marchmont, still eyeing the Frenchwoman significantly, "you did think of making *some* use of Sagoonah?"

"I see that your lordship has an idea in your head," said Madame Angelique hastily. "Tell me—what is it? I would do anything—yes, anything, anything, to rid ourselves of that enemy!"

"*Anything* did you say?" asked the Duke: and he drew his chair more closely to that which the woman occupied.

"Good heavens, how strange your Grace is looking at me!" she cried: and then in a faltering voice she added, "What—what do you mean, my lord? what would you have done? what—what would you do?"

"Indora," answered Marchmont, hovering as it were round the point to which he longed to come, but on which he dared not too abruptly seek to settle the Frenchwoman's mind,—"Indora is an obstacle or an eyesore, for some reason or another, in Sagoonah's path?"

"Yes, my lord. Well?"—and Madame Angelique held her breath half hushed.

"Well," continued the Duke—and he drew his chair closer still towards the milliner, who sate just opposite to him, "if Sagoonah were to remove that obstacle or eyesore, it were all the better for us?"

"Yes, my lord—if Sagoonah *would*!" said Madame Angelique in a low deep voice. "But——"

"But what?" asked the Duke: then after a pause, during which he gazed significantly upon the milliner, he added, "Sagoonah is to meet you to-morrow—and the slightest hint, if backed by gold——"

"Yes—a hint, my lord!" whispered Madame Angelique, at the same time that she glanced furtively to the right and left as if to assure herself that there was no listener.

"And it is for you to give this hint," replied Marchmont, slowly and deliberately accentuating his words.

Then those two—that unscrupulous aristocrat and that infamous woman,—exchanged prolonged looks of intelligence: their meaning was now beyond disguise—and if it were not, these looks would have transfused it. There was a pause of several minutes; and at length Marchmont, laying his hand upon the milliner's arm, said, "Is it to be done?"

"Yes—it is to be done," she responded: and a long-drawn breath followed that answer.

Marchmont rose from his seat—filled two glasses with wine—handed one to Madame Angelique—and tossed the contents of the other down his throat. It was as if these two unprincipled creatures were ratifying in blood-red wine the compact of blood which was settled between them!

There was a little more conversation—and then the Duke of Marchmont took his departure.

CHAPTER LIX.

SAGOONAH.

On the following day, punctual to the hour of appointment, Madame Angelique was at the spot where she was to meet Sagoonah. She was not kept many moments waiting before the ayah made her appearance; and the latter at once said, "Whatsoever you may have to tell me, be brief—for Mark is about the premises."

"Sagoonah," replied Madame Angelique, at once coming to the point—for the interview of the previous day had given her a deeper insight into the Hindoo woman's character than she had ever obtained before,—"Sagoonah, have you a particular feeling to appease or gratify, and yet dare not follow its bent?"

"What would you have me do?" asked the ayah, her dark lustrous eyes fixed searchingly upon the milliner's countenance.

"I know not what feeling inspires you towards your mistress," was Madame Angelique's quick rejoinder: "but this I do know—that if I entertained hate or jealousy in respect to another, I would not scruple to obey the impulse!"

"I told you that you were a temptress in my path," replied Sagoonah: "and it is so!"—but she lingered at the fence, and her eyes wandered slowly over the Frenchwoman's countenance, while the white drapery rose and sank with the heavings of her bosom.

"I have been told," continued the milliner, "that the Hindoo women are armed with a terrible fortitude—that they are courageous under all circumstances—that they are strong and firm, resolute and decided, in avenging the wrongs they have sustained, in appeasing the hatred excited within them, and in removing the objects of their jealousy from their path. Again I say that I know not which of all these feelings animates *you*: but very certain am I that you have all that courage—all that resolution—all that strength of purpose——"

"What words are these," said Sagoonah, in a deep voice, "which you are breathing in my ear? and wherefore do they thus sink down into those recesses of my heart where the evil spirit lurks?"

She pressed both her hands upon her left bosom as if to subdue the heavings which sprang from the agitation of the heart beneath: she moaned in spirit—she seemed to shudder with the thought that was thrilling through her brain.

"There is a way," continued Madame Angelique, protruding her head over the fence in such a manner that she could speak in a whisper almost close to Sagoonah's ear,—"there is a way by which vengeance, jealousy, or hatred may be gratified, and yet no risk run. What, for instance, if a dagger were planted in the heart of an enemy, and the right hand of that enemy were so placed as to seem as if it had just fallen from the hilt after dealing the blow? Or it might be the same with a knife——"

Indescribable was the fiend-like look which Sagoonah slowly bent upon the execrable woman who was thus tempting her,—a look in which malicious satisfaction, fierce resolution, burning hope, and other strong feelings as well as dark passions concentrated all their power!

"Here is a heavy purse, full of golden guineas," said Madame Angelique: and she passed the purse over the fence.

If the look which Sagoonah had just bent upon her was indescribable,—equally impossible of description was the air of blended hauteur, disgust, and indignation with which Sagoonah took that purse and tossed it into the field where Madame Angelique was standing. At the same time her eyes sent forth vivid fires, and her ivory teeth glistened between the thin scarlet lips.

"No—not for a bribe!" said Sagoonah, in a voice expressive of scorn and loathing: "but for that other reason——yes, yes!"

Madame Angelique gazed upon her with a sensation of terror—a sort of feeling as if she shuddered lest the Hindoo woman was not what she seemed, but that all in an instant she might burst forth into another form, and perhaps with a savage yell spring upon her in the shape of a tigress, or in the twinkling of an eye twist the huge coils of a snake around her——so dread was the fascination, so wildly strange yet likewise awe-inspiring the expression of Sagoonah's eyes!

"Go!" said the ayah. "I do not ask why you have prompted me to this deed—nor who first of all urged you on to prompt me. Go—it shall be done: and perhaps to-morrow the intelligence will reach your ears that this house"—and she pointed towards it—"has become the scene of a fearful deed."

With these words the ayah turned abruptly away from the fence; and Madame Angelique, picking up the indignantly discarded purse, betook herself across the field towards the main road.

It was night—and Christina Ashton could not sleep. The weather was exceedingly sultry—indeed most oppressively so: she had been slightly indisposed the whole day—she was restless, uneasy, and feverish. It was twelve o'clock—and she vainly endeavoured to close her eyes. It may be easily supposed that her thoughts were actively engaged: for when are the thoughts ever more active than while the head is pressing a sleepless pillow? She knew that Zoe had taken her departure from London: a paragraph amongst the fashionable intelligence in a morning newspaper had told her this much. Too well, too well could poor Christina conjecture the cause of her amiable friend's prolonged indisposition; and bitterly, bitterly at times did she blame herself for having been more or less mixed up with that cause. And yet, as the reader knows full well, she was innocent:—the snows on the highest peaks of the Alpine mountains were not purer than Christina's thoughts!

She could not sleep: and it was twelve o'clock. Silence prevailed throughout the habitation: silence was outside too—for the air was stagnant in its heaviness, and not a single leaf in the garden was ruffled. But presently that silence which reigned inside the dwelling, was broken—no, not broken—gently, and slightly, and almost imperceptibly intruded upon by the softest sound of a step upon the stair. Yet Christina heard it; and with suspended breath she listened. Again she heard it; and the thought flashed to her mind that Sagoonah was violating the pledge she had given not to descend again at night to study the huge files of the *Times*.

"This is wrong of Sagoonah," said Christina to herself: "it is doubly wrong—in the first place because no one ought to be moving about the house with a candle at this time of night—and secondly because she herself admitted that for some particular reason the Princess would be angry with her if she looked into those files."

Having thus mused to herself, Christina sate up in bed and again listened. All was profoundly silent; and with suspended breath did our young heroine continue to await the slightest, faintest sound that might next fall upon her ear. And it came: it was another footstep—so light, so airy, indeed so barely perceptible, that a doubt even lingered in Christina's mind whether she had caught it. Still she was resolved to assure herself on the point—but yet to do so in such a way that in case of being mistaken, she herself might not incur the risk of disturbing any other sleeper. It was therefore with the utmost caution she rose and opened the door—a caution so great that neither the turning of the handle nor the moving of the door upon its hinges raised a sound half so audible as the footstep she had heard.

But, Ah! as she looked forth upon the landing, she beheld a light glimmering from the Princess's chamber, the door of which evidently stood open. Now the first thought that struck her was that Indora had been seized with indisposition: and yet she heard no sounds of voices—no one moving in the chamber of her Highness. She hastened along the passage,—her naked feet raising not the slightest sound: but yet her night-dress swept for an instant against the wall—and the next moment Sagoonah issued forth from the chamber of the Princess. She had a light in one hand—and she appeared as if she had just thrust something with the other amidst the folds of her dress; for she was apparelled in her day-costume. An ejaculation was about to issue from Christina's lips—an anxious inquiry whether the Princess was indisposed?—when Sagoonah made her a vehement sign to hold her peace; and Christina was now struck by the strange expression of the ayah's countenance and the fearful light that was burning in her eyes. An unknown terror for an instant seized upon the young maiden,—transfixing, petrifying her. During this momentary interval Sagoonah noiselessly closed the door of the Princess's chamber; and then making a sign for Christina to retreat into her own, she followed her thither.

Closing the door with an unabated caution, Sagoonah placed her candle upon the drawers; and taking Christina's hand, made her sit down by her side upon an ottoman which was at the foot of the bed: for the chamber which our heroine occupied was as elegantly and as sumptuously furnished as all the rest.

"You are surprised, Miss Ashton," said Sagoonah, in a low whispering voice, but with an air of perfect calmness, contrasting strangely with the sinister expression her countenance had worn a few moments back,—"you are surprised, Miss Ashton, to have thus found me in the chamber of my mistress."

"I cannot say that I am *still* surprised," responded Christina; "because I have no doubt you will give a satisfactory explanation. I feared that the Lady Indora was ill: but this, thank heaven, does not seem to be the case, or you would not have left her—and moreover you would have permitted me to render my assistance."

"Listen to me, Miss Ashton," continued Sagoonah. "You know that I am devoted to my beloved mistress——"

"I know that you have indeed every reason to love her," said our amiable heroine: "for I, who have only known her for a few short weeks, love her much—and you have known her from your infancy! But tell me, Sagoonah, why did you look so strange when issuing from the chamber? You terrified me."

"Listen, Miss Ashton," continued the ayah, with the calmest self-possession. "I have no doubt that with your English notions—and you call them the effects of your high civilization—you will be startled and astonished—perhaps you will even survey me with pity and contempt, when I tell you of the belief which I entertain. The conviction is firm in my mind that evil spirits walk abroad at night—and that they have not merely the power to haunt and scare those whose bedsides they visit, but likewise to wreak upon them a physical mischief. Do you comprehend me, Miss Ashton?"

We should here observe that we are not recording the precise language of which Sagoonah made use—nor do we ever when describing her discourse. She was not quite so proficient in the English tongue as to speak it with that degree of accuracy which our mode of shaping her language would appear to represent. Therefore it was not astonishing that she should ask Christina if she succeeded in making herself understood?

"Yes—I comprehend you perfectly," replied our heroine: "but I deeply regret, Sagoonah, to learn that you abandon yourself to these superstitions."

"Bear with me, my dear Miss Ashton," returned the ayah gravely: "remember that from my very infancy I was brought up in this faith——"

"And yet the Lady Indora has not the same superstitions," observed Christina mildly.

"True, Miss Ashton!" rejoined Sagoonah: "but the Lady Indora may be as wrong in rejecting them as I may be in clinging to them."

"We will not discuss the argument itself," replied Christina: "but you have yet to inform me——"

"Why I entered the bed-chamber of my mistress," added the ayah. "Can you not conjecture after all I have said?" she continued, fixing her dark eyes upon our heroine: "can you not comprehend how, loving her as I do, I often and often feel anxious on her account? To-night I could not rest——"

"You had not sought your couch, Sagoonah," interrupted Miss Ashton, glancing at the ayah's attire.

"No—because I knew full well that I could not sleep," was the Hindoo woman's response: "I had that feeling which told me how useless it would be to seek a bed on which I should only be tossing restlessly. I was full of vague terrors—I can scarcely explain them—I cannot account for them! But certain it is that under their influence I sought the chamber of my mistress to assure myself that she was safe—that no evil spirits were haunting her couch nor working her a mischief——"

"Sagoonah, Sagoonah!" exclaimed Miss Ashton, surveying the ayah with a painful suspicion,—"I know not what to think of this explanation of yours! It is hard to doubt you if the truth be issuing from your lips; and yet—and yet——"

"You do not believe me?" said the ayah, in a tone of plaintive distress. "Ah! this is indeed a source of sorrow and regret for me—because I love you, Miss Ashton — and to lose your confidence——"

Here the wily Sagoonah stopped short; and the tears trickled slowly from her lustrous eyes, glistening like diamonds upon her dark but smooth and polished cheeks. And then to the long ebon fringes of each upper lid did other tears hang quivering and sparkling; and her bosom seemed convulsed with stifling sobs—and her looks were bent so plaintively, so appealingly upon Christina, that the generous heart of the young maiden was profoundly touched.

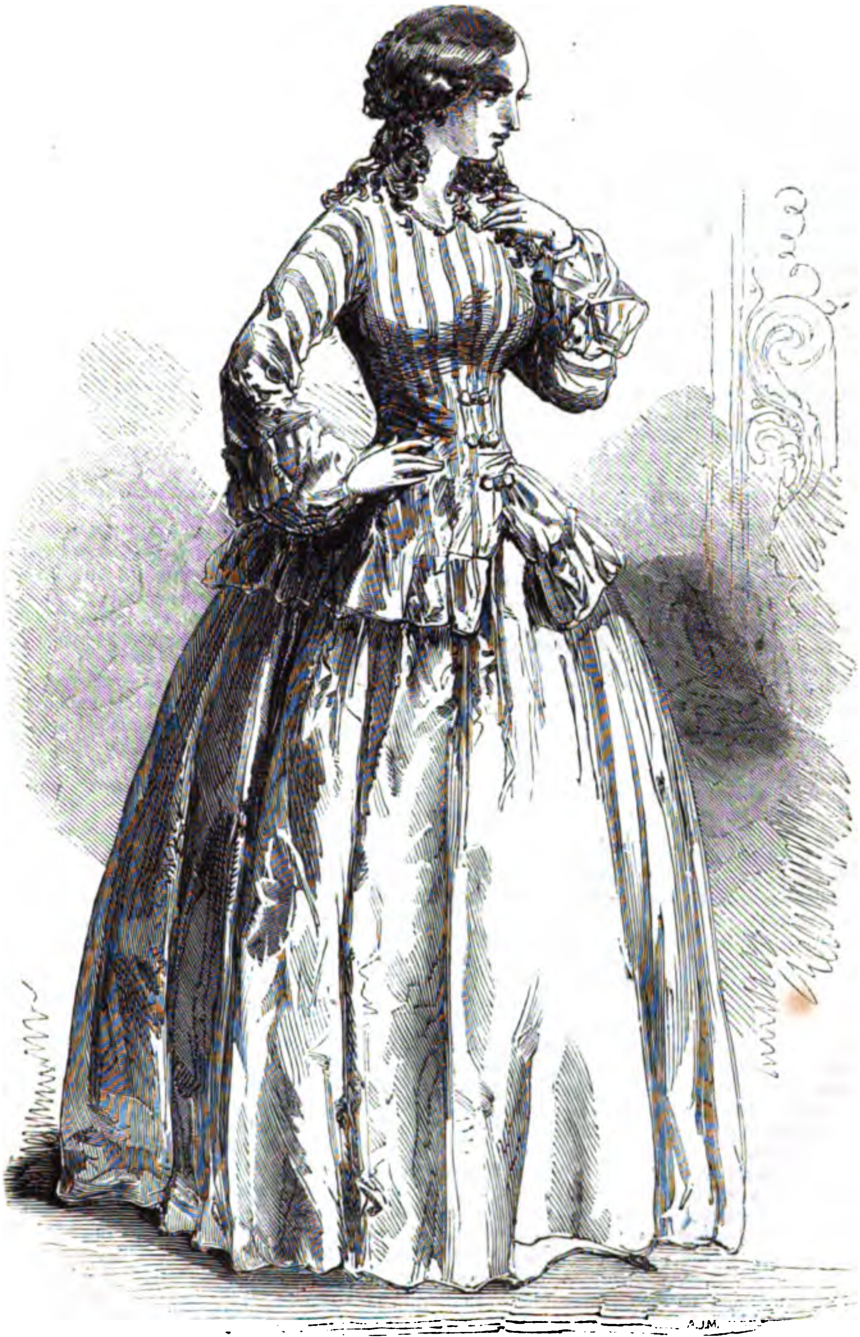
"If for a moment I have wronged you, Sagoonah," she said, taking the ayah's hand,—"if with my English notions I have too harshly and suspiciously estimated your conduct—or rather, if I have not known how to interpret it at all, but yet have fancied that you were not truthfully nor frankly explaining it,—I beseech you to pardon me."

"Oh! now your kindness touches me even more than that transient suspicion on your part wounded me!"—and as Sagoonah thus spoke, she took Christina's hand, pressed it first to her bosom, and then carried it to her lips. "Yes, my dear Miss Ashton," she continued, "it was naught but the truth—the sincere, the honest, the genuine truth that I was telling you. I am superstitious——can I be blamed for this weakness, if a weakness it be?"

"No, no—not blamed! But I must enlighten you, my poor Sagoonah," said the amiable heroine of our tale. "You need not apprehend that evil spirits will haunt one so good as your noble-hearted mistress. If there be evil spirits, the wicked alone have cause to tremble at them. It is not well, Sagoonah, to wander about in the dead of night as you are doing: others who know less of you than I—or rather, who understand your disposition less—would conceive that you were troubled with a guilty conscience. Night is the time when the good sleep—or at least, when they remain in their beds: and it is the season when guilt walks abroad. The fancy is irresistibly led to associate frightful and hideous deeds with midnight wanderings——"

"Miss Ashton, Miss Ashton, you terrify me!" murmured the ayah, who was indeed conscience-stricken by the words which our heroine was thus addressing to her in a tone of mild and gentle solemnity.

"There is naught to terrify you in what I say," answered Christina; "and very far from my object is it to make such an impression upon your mind. I merely wish you to comprehend that these midnight wanderings are not suitable nor becoming; and that henceforth you must exercise more strength of mind than to yield to superstitious fears. Have you not read, Sagoonah," continued



No. 40.—FOURTH SERIES. AMY SUTTON.

Christina, "that night is the season for the wanderings of those who are guilty in deed or those who are equally sinful in purpose, — the season too, Sagoonah," added Christina, with a deepening impressiveness, "when Murder stalks abroad——"

"Hush, Miss Ashton—hush!" said Sagoonah, with a visible terror depicted upon her countenance. "You frighten me—you strike terror into the depths of my soul! Rest assured that I will wander about the house no more. Believe me," continued the ayah, in a tone of mingled entreaty and persuasion,—"believe me that you have made a deep impression upon me! I see that you are right—I will henceforth follow your advice in all things: but may I hope that you will keep silent as to this occurence of to-night?"

Christina reflected for a few moments: and then she said, "It will be the second time, Sagoonah, that I shall have consented to shield you from the displeasure of your mistress: but remember that it is the last! You have solemnly pledged yourself that you will not repeat these nocturnal wanderings—and I believe you. But if in this or any other way you transgress for the future, I shall feel it my duty to speak with frankness to the Lady Indora. Recollect that I eat her bread as well as you do; and I am bound to care for her interests."

"My sweet Miss Ashton," said the ayah, taking Christina's small white hand and pressing it to her lips, "you shall never again have cause to be angry with me. And now good night."

Sagoonah glided noiselessly from Christina's chamber, and ascended to her own. When there—and when she had closed the door behind her—she took from beneath the folds of her garment a long dagger with a ghastly gleaming blade and a handle of curious oriental workmanship, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. As she consigned it to her trunk, her eyes flashed sinister fires; and she murmured to herself in her own native tongue, "Fool that I was to yield even for a moment to the influence of that English girl's language. But when she spoke of Murder stalking abroad, it did indeed send a thrill through me like that of a remorse!"

The ayah sate down and reflected deeply for some minutes. There was evidently a struggle within her bosom: those better feelings which Christina's language had partially excited, were in conflict with others of a dark and deadly nature; and, alas! the latter prevailed—for at the end of her meditation, Sagoonah's splendidly handsome countenance assumed an expression of the firmest decision; and with another sinister flashing of her luminous dark eyes, she ejaculated, "Yes—it shall be done!"

Throughout the following day Madame Angelique was kept in trembling nervous suspense,—every moment expecting to hear the intelligence, from some source or another, that a frightful deed of suicide had been perpetrated during the past night in the district of Bayswater. But hour after hour passed and no such tidings came. In the afternoon the vile woman proceeded into the neighbourhood of Bayswater, and entered a shop with the air of one whose sole and legitimate object was to make some little purchase: for she thought to herself that if the deed had been really accomplished, she should be certain to hear of it there. No—not a syllable!—and the shopwoman who served her, merely remarked on the fineness of the weather, but alluded not to any incident of horrible interest. Madame Angelique returned to her house in London, and sent out for the evening papers—but still without having her frightful curiosity gratified. It was evident therefore that the deed had *not* been done. Marchmont called in the evening; and it was determined that if on the morrow the intelligence so anxiously awaited did not reach the vile woman's ears, she should repair to Bayswater and obtain another interview with Sagoonah.

It was an almost sleepless night which Madame Angelique passed: for she felt assured, considering all circumstances, that the Lady Indora was bent upon her ruin; and in order therefore that her own safety might be secured (as she fancied) it was necessary that the eastern lady should perish. She rose in the morning ill with feverish anxiety: but all the forenoon passed without the wished-for intelligence reaching her. Again, in the afternoon, she repaired to Bayswater: she entered another shop—but no unusual excitement marked the looks or the discourse of serving-men or customers: it was only too clear that the deed still remained undone.

Madame Angelique proceeded into the neighbourhood of the Princess Indora's villa; and she watched until she saw Mark, the faithful major-domo, issue forth from the premises. Then, so soon as he was out of sight, she hastened towards the fence; and in a few minutes Sagoonah made her appearance.

"I thought you would have come yesterday," said the ayah, immediately upon reaching the fence. "I fancied that you would be only too anxious to learn whether it was done—and if not, why it was left undone."

"My dear Sagoonah," answered Madame Angelique, quivering with suspense, "I felt so certain that your courage would not fail you—I was so convinced that you were endowed with such an indomitable fortitude——"

"Cease these idle flatteries!" interrupted the ayah with impatience. "I have but a minute to tarry here. Listen! There is an English girl beneath this roof——"

"I know it," said Madame Angelique: "Christina Ashton!"

"And so long as that girl is here," continued Sagoonah, with rapid utterance, "my arm is paralyzed. I need say no more. It is not in my power to devise or execute any scheme to get rid of her: this must be a task for you to undertake and to accomplish."

"But how?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, stricken aghast by the announcement. "It may take days and days to put some stratagem into execution——"

"If you, then, are so deficient in means for a small undertaking," interrupted Sagoonah coldly, "how can you possibly fancy that I shall incur every risk and make every sacrifice for a great undertaking? Understand me well! Rid me of that girl, and the deed shall be done: but so long as she remains there, I will not make another effort towards its accomplishment."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah turned abruptly away. Madame Angelique called after her: but she would not stop—neither did she even look back. She seemed as if she heard not the vile woman's words; and her tall bayadere form, clothed in its white drapery, was speedily lost amidst the trees to the view of Madame Angelique.

CHAPTER LX.

MR. SYCAMORE.

WHILE this scene was passing between three or four o'clock in the afternoon at Bayswater, Christian Ashton was pursuing his way along Piccadilly. In a few minutes he entered a fashionable hotel, and inquired of the waiter if the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was within? The response was in the affirmative; and our young hero was conducted up-stairs to an apartment where the object of his visit lay stretched upon the sofa smoking a cigar.

Nothing could exceed the freedom and ease or the luxurious languor of that state of abandonment which characterised Mr. Talbot Sycamore's posture. His head reposed upon the cushion at one end of the sofa—his feet reclined upon the high part of the sofa at the other extremity: one morocco-slipper had fallen off—the other just hung on to the tips of his toes. His elegant flowered-silk dressing-gown was all flowing open; and he inhaled the fragrance of his cigar with the comfort of one who appeared not to have a single care in the whole world.

The Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was a little past thirty years of age. He had auburn hair, which he wore very long, and which seemed to curl naturally—large whiskers of a somewhat redder tint—blue eyes—and a tolerable good-looking countenance. He was tall, slender, and well made—but had a rakish, dissipated, devil-may-care appearance, which was visible enough even beneath that easy fashionable languor that now as it were invested him. The waiter withdrew; and Christian remained alone with this gentleman.

Mr. Sycamore, taking his cigar from his mouth, waved it with a sort of graceful negligence in the direction of a chair,—at the same time suffering a long whiff of smoke to exhale slowly from his lips. Our hero took the chair, and said, "I have called, sir, in consequence of the letter which I received from you by this morning's post."

"Ah, I see," observed Mr. Sycamore, speaking with that sort of drawing-room drawl which impresses on with the idea that it requires a very great effort indeed to make use of that faculty of speech which is one of the main distinctions between its possessor and the lower animals. "You are the young man who advertised for the post of private secretary, with all sorts of qualifications?"

"And you, sir, I presume," answered Christian, "are the gentleman who wrote to inform me that you required precisely such an assistant as I announced myself to be."

Mr. Sycamore slowly turned himself half round upon the sofa, and gave a good long stare at our young hero, whose speech he evidently fancied had a sort of covert irony or rebuke in it. And such was indeed the case: for Christian, though perfectly free from undue pride, was somewhat incensed at being called "a young man;" and the term "all sorts of qualifications" had struck him as being more or less supercilious. He however endured the staring process with a becoming composure,—firmly without hardihood, and with a suitable dignity that was devoid of disrespect as it was totally apart from insolence.

"Well, it is perfectly true," resumed the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore, "that I am in want of a private secretary. You see, I am a man of large acquaintance—but select, Mr. Ashton—all select. Damme, nothing vulgar! Dukes, Marquises, Earls, and those sort of people—these are my friends. Now, this acquaintance—so extensive and yet so choice—involves me in a devil's own mass of correspondence—and it's more than I can manage for myself. That's why I require a secretary," he lazily added.

Christian remarked that he considered that there was nothing very onerous or difficult in the duties which he would have to fulfil;—and we may observe that he was too anxious to obtain another situation to suffer himself to be disheartened or disgusted by any peculiarities in Mr. Sycamore's conversation or manners.

"You have no objection to travel?" resumed this gentleman: "I don't mean travelling all over the world—but simply on a trip to Brighton, or Cheltenham, or Ramsgate, or Dover, just as the fancy takes me. You see, I am a bachelor, and have to kill time to the best of my ability."

Christian assured Mr. Sycamore that he had no objection to accompany him on such little journeys as those to which he had alluded.

"You will see the world and amuse yourself," continued Mr. Sycamore; "and I have no doubt your place will be an easy and agreeable one. At all events I can tell you *this*—you will never see any low people visiting me. I never in my life spoke to a person that did not keep his carriage. If any friend of mine puts down his carriage for the sake of economy,—damme, I cut him instantly! So now you see what sort of a person I am."

Christian did see it, and with infinite disgust too: but he was careful not to betray what he felt—for it was not his business to quarrel with Mr. Sycamore's peculiar fastidiousness, nor was it his interest to throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation simply because he had to do with a coxcomb or a boaster. Mr. Sycamore continued to talk in the same style for another quarter of an hour; and then he asked for testimonials. Christian produced those which he had received from the Duke of Marchmont and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha,—wherewith Mr. Sycamore was pleased to express his satisfaction,—observing that they were at least not "low people," and that he had no doubt Christian would suit him very well.

"I am going out of town the first thing to-morrow morning," said Mr. Sycamore; "and you must accompany me. You had therefore better be here as soon after breakfast as you can."

"I will be here, sir," answered Christian, with ingenuous readiness, "at nine o'clock—or earlier, if you wish it."

Mr. Sycamore gave a sort of despairing groan—and then surveyed our hero with wonderment and dismay. Christian saw that he had said or done something that was most outrageous: but for the life of him he could not conjecture what it was.

"At nine o'clock in the morning?" at length said Mr. Sycamore in a faint voice, as if his nerves had been dreadfully shocked. "What I call the first thing in the morning, is about half-an-hour past noon. Pray don't entertain such low ideas as to confound night with morning. It's all very well for people who have to get up to black boots, or take down shutters, or open their shops: but a gentleman's morning," continued Mr. Sycamore, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "begins a little after noon-day—and it is just allowable for him to begin his breakfast at one o'clock. So if you are here at half-past two to-morrow, it will be a very convenient hour in the morning indeed. You will of course come with your luggage, as we shall start off at once for Ramsgate—which I am told is getting rather a fashionable place since I began to patronize it last year."

Christian promised to be punctual at half-past two on the following day; and he issued forth from Mr. Sycamore's presence. Descending the stairs, he was passing through the hall of the hotel, when he perceived a very handsomely-dressed groom,—who was a nice-looking dapper little man of about five-and-twenty, but bow-legged, as indeed all approved and veritable grooms ought to be,—engaged in some little altercation with another man who had the air as well as the odour of a hostler from a livery-stable.

"Now, look you, Jeames," said the hostler to the dapper groom, "it's no use talking. My guvner says as how the cab sha'n't be sent never no more unless the bill's paid, or a good reference gived. You and me, Jeames, know what's what—and it *is* rayther hard that your guvner should run up a tick of forty-five pound for the hire of a cab and never so much as pay a scurrick on account. It isn't the cheese, Jeames—no, blow me tight if it is!"

"Nonsense, Tom!—it's all right," answered the dapper groom, whose christian name appeared to be James. "My master's a gentleman of fortune, which has his own peculiar ways——"

Christian heard no more: indeed he had not purposely lingered to catch any of the conversation at all: but he could not help overhearing the little which we have recorded, as he passed through the hall. He thought nothing of it at the time; and it speedily slipped out of his memory. He was glad that he had obtained a new situation; and he at once set off to Bayswater, to communicate the circumstance to his sister,—who he well knew would be delighted with the intelligence. He found Christina at home; and when it was announced to the Princess that he was to leave London on the morrow, she bade him remain and pass the evening with Christina.

At half-past two o'clock on the following day, Christian alighted from a cab at the door of the hotel in Piccadilly; and his boxes were deposited in the hall. He inquired of the waiter for Mr. Sycamore; and at the same instant the dapper-looking groom stepped forward, inquiring, "Are you Mr. Ashton?"

"Yes," answered Christian: and an unpleasant suspicion at once smote him.

"Master will be ready in half-an-hour," rejoined James: "he was up rather late this morning. If you will step into the coffee-room, Mr. Ashton, you can sit there till we are ready to start."

Our hero followed this recommendation; and as there happened to be no one else in the coffee-room at the time, he thought he should like to have a few minutes' conversation with one of the waiters. He did not exactly admire the discovery he had just made—that his new employer was the master of the dapper groom, and consequently the object of the somewhat peculiar discourse he had overheard on the previous day between the dapper groom aforesaid and the hostler from the livery-stable. If there were anything at all suspicious in respect to Mr. Sycamore's character, it was not too late for our hero to resign the situation he had accepted: for he assuredly had no inclination to go travelling about in the service of one who contracted debts without the means of paying them. He accordingly rang the bell, so that under the pretext of ordering some little refreshment, he might draw the waiter into discourse.

"Ah, sir—I see, sir," said this individual, when a few remarks had been exchanged, "you are the young gentleman who has taken the situation of private secretary to Mr. Sycamore?"—and then with a great show of tidiness, he briskly wiped away some imaginary crumbs from an adjacent table.

"I suppose Mr. Sycamore is highly respectable and very well off?" observed Christian inquiringly.

"He has paid all his bills, sir, this morning," responded the waiter; "and so there is no complaint to make. All gentlemen as pays their bills, is respectable, sir:"—and the waiter affected to be exceedingly busy in conveying the Supplement of the *Times* from one table to another, and then bringing it back to the place whence he had removed it.

Christian saw by these little manœuvres that the waiter purposely lingered with a view of being drawn into conversation, but that he did not like to speak too fast, nor too confidentially in the first instance.

"What have I to pay?" asked our hero, taking out his purse.

"Pay, sir? Tell you directly, sir. Sandwiches, one-and-six—half-pint of sherry, one-and-three:—two-and-nine, if you please, sir."

Christian handed the waiter five shillings, whereupon that functionary instantaneously began to fumble in his breeches' pocket, holding himself much on one side as he did so—and delaying as long as he could to produce the change, because he more than half suspected that he was to keep the balance for himself. And this was what Christian did mean: for he saw plainly enough that the waiter required to be lured rather than drawn into confidential discourse.

"Keep that for yourself," said Christian.

"*Very* much obliged to you, sir," answered the waiter with a bow: and having with his napkin brushed away a few more imaginary crumbs from the corner of the table, and moved the mustard-pot to the other side of the salt-sellar, he said, "I think you *may* find Mr. Sycamore an agreeable gentleman enough: but he is very fast and very racketty."

"He has a great many visitors, has he not?" inquired Christian.

"Yes, sir—a great many," answered the waiter: then after a pause, he added, "But he is always denied to them, sir—always."

"Denied to them?" ejaculated our hero, in amazement.

"Oh, yes, sir! Tailors—bootmakers—jewellers—livery-stable-keepers—in fact, sir," added the waiter, with a significant look, "Mr. Sycamore is very high and mighty indeed, and does not like low people:" having said which, the waiter again stared in a meaning manner upon Christian's countenance.

"Do you intend me to understand," demanded our hero, "that Mr. Sycamore is not a respectable person? You can speak frankly——I do not ask through impertinent curiosity—and I shall not repeat anything you may tell me."

"Well, sir," said the waiter, "I'll tell you exactly all I know of Mr. Sycamore. He has been three months at the hotel—and he never paid his bill till to-day. He gets up at about noon, and comes home to bed at three or four in the morning. He hired a cabriolet from the livery-stables, and never paid for that till this morning. But all his bills he *has* settled; and now you know as much of him as I do."

"He keeps one servant, I suppose?" said Christian.

"Yes—the groom that you have seen, sir:"—and then, after glancing towards the door and looking out of the window, the waiter added, "And that groom, sir, is as downy a little fellow as ever you could wish to see in a day's walk."

"I do not precisely comprehend you," remarked Christian.

"Why, sir, I mean that he is up to all sorts of snuffs, and down to all kinds of dodges. He knows a thing or two: he is as artful a cove as here and there one. He gets up uncommon early in the morning: no one gets up earlier. He is wide-awake, and can't be done."

At this moment a couple of gentlemen entered the coffee-room to take some refreshments: and Christian's discourse with the waiter ended abruptly. Our young hero did not altogether like the character he had heard of Mr. Sycamore: but as for that of the groom James, it had been explained to him in so figurative a manner, with so many rhetorical flourishes and allegorical illustrations, that he knew not precisely how to estimate it.

"After all," said Christian to himself, "I have heard nothing actually or substantially prejudicial to Mr. Sycamore. He has paid his debts at last, and will leave the hotel in an honourable manner. Perhaps it is one of his peculiarities to keep his creditors waiting and pay them in a mass. It may be that he considers them a set of 'low people,' and likes to show his contempt for them. At all events, I had better keep to my engagement: it will be easy for me to throw it up if it do not please me."

Scarcely had our young hero arrived at this conclusion, when James entered to inform him that Mr. Sycamore was ready to start. A couple of cabs were at the door, as Christian's new employer travelled with a considerable quantity of luggage. That gentleman entered one of the vehicles, to the box of which James ascended; and Christian followed in the other. They proceeded to the railway-station at London Bridge,—where the Hon. Talbot Sycamore took a first-class ticket for himself, a second-class one for Christian, and a third-class ticket for James. The train was just ready to start; and they proceeded to occupy their seats according to the classification just described.

In the compartment to which Christian Ashton was assigned, there were only two passengers in addition to himself. One was an elderly man, who settled himself in the corner to take a nap,—most probably for the purpose of sleeping off the liquor of which he had evidently been partaking rather freely, and the fumes of which hovered around him, giving to the compartment the savour of a wine-vaults. The other passenger was a female very neatly dressed, and with a veil drawn over her countenance. Opposite to this female did Christian happen to place himself; and it occurred to him that she gave a slight start, and even uttered a low ejaculation, as he entered the carriage. He could not very easily distinguish her countenance through the veil: but yet he saw enough of it to convince him that it was not altogether unfamiliar. He did not however like to regard her too earnestly,—especially as she seemed to hang down her head as if in annoyance or confusion that he had even looked at her as attentively as he had done.

The train rolled out of the station: the intoxicated gentleman in the corner soon began to convince his fellow-passengers, by certain nasal sounds, that he was wrapped in the arms of Morpheus; and then the female, slowly leaning forward, said, "How do you do, Mr. Ashton?"

At the same time she raised her veil: and our hero at once recognised Amy Sutton,—who, as the reader will recollect, was one of the Duchess of Marchmont's lady's-maids. We may also, perhaps, remind the reader that it was she of whom the unprincipled Duke to a certain extent made use when engaged in his vile plot against his wife. She was now in her twenty-fifth year: we have already described her as tall and handsome, but with a look displaying a resolute decisiveness of character, and which could at times merge into a savage fierceness. She was selfish—worldly-minded—and avaricious. At the time when Christian knew her, her character was unimpeachable; for her pride rather than her principle had prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment the sum of her hoarded gold. It was this same Amy Sutton who now made herself known to Christina in the railway train, as above described.

After the exchange of a few observations, he inquired whether she was still in the Duchess of Marchmont's service?

"No," she answered: and her look became all in an instant strangely gloomy.

Christian now observed that she was altered since he had last seen her many months back: she was pale, and her countenance was somewhat thin and careworn. He did not like to continue questioning her; for he found that his first query had somehow or another given her pain. There was a silence of a few minutes, during which he felt awkward; and she looked down in sinister, moody pensiveness. At length that silence was broken by herself: for suddenly raising her eyes, and glancing towards the tipsy individual to assure herself that he was still slumbering, she leant forward, and said in a deep voice, "The Duke of Marchmont is the greatest villain upon earth!"

"You and I saw enough of him, Amy," responded Christian, "to be enabled to arrive at no very favourable conclusion with respect to his character."

"You know full well, Mr. Ashton," she rejoined, "that I was completely innocent of any wilful complicity in that scandalous plot——"

"I know it, Amy," answered our hero. "You were deceived by appearances: those dresses which were worn by another——"

"Yes, I was indeed deceived!" resumed Amy Sutton. "Never was deception more gross—more abominable!"

"I hope that the Duchess did not believe you guilty, and visit you with her displeasure?" said Christian.

"Oh, no! the Duchess of Marchmont treated me most kindly. Indeed, I have remained in her service until about a fortnight ago:"—then, after another brief pause, she added in a low deep voice, "That miscreant Marchmont has been my—my—ruin!"

Christian gazed upon her in astonishment. Such words coming from female lips, naturally conveyed the impression of seduction's triumph: and our hero was surprised for more reasons than one. He had always heard Amy Sutton spoken of as a young woman of unimpeachable virtue, and who indeed would fiercely resent the slightest liberty that was taken with her. Moreover, he had believed that she had detested the Duke on account of that iniquitous affair of which they had been speaking. How, then, was it that her virtue had succumbed? How had her aversion been changed into love?

"Do not think, Mr. Ashton," she presently resumed, "that I have been wilfully and wantonly frail. If that were the case, I should not be addressing you in such a manner. No—with shame should I do my best to conceal my fault! Can you not understand me? I was the victim of the most diabolical atrocity—and I will be signally revenged!"

Christian was more and more astonished at what he heard: but it was a point on which he would not ask questions: he could only listen to just so much as Amy Sutton might choose to reveal to him.

"Perhaps you consider it indelicate," she went on to say, "that I should make such a revelation to one of the opposite sex. But it is because you already know so much of the villany of Marchmont's character—and because we were both as it were mixed up in a transaction which so signally exposed his baseness and his turpitude—and perhaps, too, it is a relief to my goaded feelings to be enabled to speak of my wrongs to one who knows their author so well, and knows likewise how fully capable he is of inflicting any wrong, even the worst and most flagrant that one fellow-creature can sustain at the hands of another. It was shortly after the return of the family from Oaklands to Belgrave Square—he made an overture to me—I rejected it with scorn and indignation—he repeated it—he displayed gold before my eyes—and still I rejected his advances with abhorrence. I threatened to leave my situation the very next day, and to explain to the Duchess wherefore I left——"

Amy Sutton paused for a minute: her countenance was perfectly livid with the workings of her feelings and the deep sense of her wrongs.

"That same night," she continued, in a voice so low that it was barely audible, and after having flung another glance towards the slumberer in the corner,—"that very night I was awakened from my sleep by the sensation of something poured between my lips: but between that awakening and a sinking into a state of perfect unconsciousness, there was only a moment's interval—so that it appears like a dream when I think of it! When I awoke in the morning"—and here Amy Sutton lowered the veil over her countenance,—"when I awoke in the morning, the Duke was with me—my ruin——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a low, deep, stifling sob. Christian sate aghast at this narrative of diabolic villany. Bad as he knew the Duke of Marchmont to be, yet he could scarcely have fancied that he was capable of such hideous turpitude as this. Amy Sutton sate back in the railway carriage with her veil over her countenance; and in this posture she remained, completely immoveable, for nearly ten minutes,—all her senses and faculties being absorbed in the contemplation of the tremendous wrong which she had sustained and of the vengeance that she purposed to wreak whenever the opportunity should serve.

"Perhaps you will ask me," she at length resumed,—"or at all events you will wonder, why I did not drag the Duke of Marchmont before the tribunals and punish him for his flagrant iniquity? But if I had adopted that course, it would have been likewise to expose my own disgrace—to parade my own dishonour; and I am dependent on my character for my bread. The world might have sympathised with me perhaps; but amongst all those sympathisers, who would give me another situation? who would have received me into his home to attend upon his virtuous wife or his chaste daughters? And then, too, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy, "there was another consideration—a consideration suggested by the language which the Duke himself held to me when I reproached and threatened him for the atrocity of his conduct. It was that against my accusation he would reply that he had been invited to my bed—or at least that I had willingly received him there—and that I subsequently proclaimed a foul charge against him because he would not yield to the exorbitance of my demands for pecuniary reparation."

"And after that, Amy," said Christian, "you remained for several months in the service of the Duchess?"

"Yes," she replied—and then remained silent, offering no explanation of this portion of her conduct: nor did Christian like to ask for any.

There was a farther pause, which was broken by our hero inquiring whether Amy Sutton was going all the way to Ramsgate?

"I am not," she answered. "My destination is a small village a little way on this side of Ashford."

She said no more; and there was another long pause. The tipsy individual in the corner now woke up; and having slept off the fumes of his former potations, he appeared to think it was necessary to renew them. He accordingly drew forth a case-bottle from his pocket; and taking out the cork, applied it first to his nose to inhale the smell, and next to his lips to imbibe the liquor. Having taken a deep draught, he wiped the mouth of the bottle with his sleeve, and proffered it to Amy, who declined it with disgust—then to Christian, who refused it with cold civility.

"Well, then," said the drunken gentleman, "there is all the more for me:"—and he forthwith proceeded to empty the bottle.

He then observed, for the behoof of his listeners, that he could replenish it at Ashford—but that he wished he had done so at Reigate, where the brandy was better: and then it occurred to him that there was very good rum to be got at the Ashford station—and he thought it might agree with him best. He next noticed that the crops looked very fine: though how he could manage to see them at all, was a perfect miracle, inasmuch as he had one eye closed and the other blinking like an owl's. So, having delivered himself of the sage observations just recorded, he fell into the corner and into a sound sleep simultaneously.

In about half-an-hour the train stopped at Headcorn; and there Amy Sutton took leave of Christian Ashton—for she had reached her destination. At Ashford the intoxicated gentleman woke up, and contrived to alight for the purpose of replenishing his flask. When he had returned to his seat, he applied himself with much industry to the said flask,—the effects of which, instead of making him sleepy, rendered him quarrelsome: so that, to Christian's surprise and astonishment, he began to pull off his coat, hiccoughing out an expression of his deep regret at the necessity under which he laboured of polishing our hero off. For this polishing purpose he rose up from his seat; but Christian, in order to put an end to these pugnacious displays, forced him back into it again, with the assurance that if they did come to a fight it would be much the worse for him who provoked it. Fortunately the city of Canterbury was soon reached; and there the drunken gentleman was claimed by his wife and three grown-up daughters, who were waiting to receive him, and who assailed him in no measured terms on beholding the condition in which he had brought himself back to the bosom of his family.

Ramsgate was reached in due time; and the Hon. Talbot Sycamore took up his quarters at the Royal Hotel.

CHAPTER LXI.

CHRISTIAN'S NEW EMPLOYER.

Whether it were under the bracing influence of the sea-air—or whether it were because even the most fashionable people keep more natural hours when at watering-places,—we cannot take it upon ourselves to decide: but certain it was that the Hon. Talbot Sycamore did actually and positively leave his couch at nine in the morning after his arrival, and did with an equal degree of certitude sit down to breakfast at half-past nine when he had taken a short lounge upon the sands in his flowered silk dressing-gown, his morocco slippers, and a red cap with a gold tassel very much resembling a Turkish fez.

While still at breakfast, he somewhat sententiously inquired of the waiter whether his private secretary had partaken of *his* breakfast?—and on receiving an answer in the affirmative, he desired that Mr. Christian Ashton might be requested to walk up. Our hero accordingly repaired to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room; and that gentleman said, "If you place yourself at the side-table near the window, you can write a few letters to my dictation—and during the intervals when I am wearied of talking, you can gaze out upon the harbour and the sea."

This last recommendation might have been very considerate indeed if it were not somewhat puerile; and while Mr. Sycamore went on discussing his muffin, his egg, and his ham, Christian arranged the writing-materials at the side-table. The waiter entered the room with a hot muffin; and Mr. Sycamore said, with an air of easy indifference, "The first letter, Mr. Ashton, is to my London bankers. Just put the address and date—don't write the word 'Gentlemen'—but put 'My dear sirs', as I am devilish intimate with them. Waiter, some more cream."

While the waiter was absent, Mr. Sycamore remained silent; and Christian certainly thought it was rather a singular coincidence that he should only begin dictating again when the waiter reappeared. Yet such was the fact.

"Write thus," said Mr. Sycamore: "'I will thank you to remit to the Ramsgate banker five thousand pounds to my account. With regard to that sum of twenty thousand which Lord Toddington paid into your hands on my behalf the other day'——"

But here Mr. Sycamore stopped short, as the door had just closed behind the waiter. It might have been that he had dictated enough at a stretch for one of his languid temperament: but it certainly appeared to Christian very much as if he desisted then and there simply because the individual for whose behoof he was thus parading his financial concerns was no longer present. However, after a little while the letter was concluded with some special instructions as to the laying-out of the twenty thousand pounds paid in by Lord Toddington; and by the time it was finished, the waiter entered to clear away the breakfast-things.

"Now, Mr. Ashton," said the Hon. Talbot Sycamore, "we must write a letter to my friend, the Duke of Arlington. Put the place and date; and then begin 'My dear Arlington.' Now go on to say—'Here I am installed in devilish comfortable quarters at Ramsgate. Do you mean, my dear fellow, to fulfil your promise of joining me here for six weeks? If so, let me know by return of post; as the place is most disgustingly crowded, and I must bespeak rooms for you at the hotel three or four days beforehand. Tell Lord Toddington that I find I have lost my wager of five thousand guineas, and shall send him up a cheque by this same post. He paid me twenty thousand the other day; so it is a devilish good sweep for him to get back a quarter of it in so short a time. By the bye, tell Toddington likewise that I will give him eight hundred for that black mare of his' ——"

Here there was another stopping-short; and Mr. Sycamore, throwing himself back in his chair, yawned considerably: but Christian could not help noticing that the waiter had left the room a few instants before the task of dictation was thus suspended. He shortly returned to finish clearing away the table; and the instant his steps were heard upon the landing outside, the dictation was renewed. We will not, however, inflict any more of it upon our readers: suffice it to say that the remainder of the letter to the Duke of Arlington was in the same familiar style as its commencement: so that to disbelieve the fact that the Hon. Talbot Sycamore was the very dear and intimate friend of his Grace of Arlington, would have been tantamount to the guilt of a supposition that the said Hon. Talbot Sycamore was dictating a tissue of falsehoods either for purposes of vain-glory, or for others still less innocent.

Several more letters were dictated to noblemen and baronets; and thence it was to be inferred that Mr. Sycamore did indeed enjoy a very select and honourable acquaintance amidst the titled aristocracy of the three kingdoms. When the letters were all finished, Mr. Sycamore affixed his signature thereto: they were duly folded—placed in envelopes—addressed—and sealed with the Hon. Talbot Sycamore's armorial bearings, which consisted of a griffin with three heads and such other little curious conceptions as the wisdom of the Heralds' College or the genius of some imaginative seal-engraver had succeeded in producing.

"Shall I take these letters to the post?" inquired Christian, when the morning's task was over.

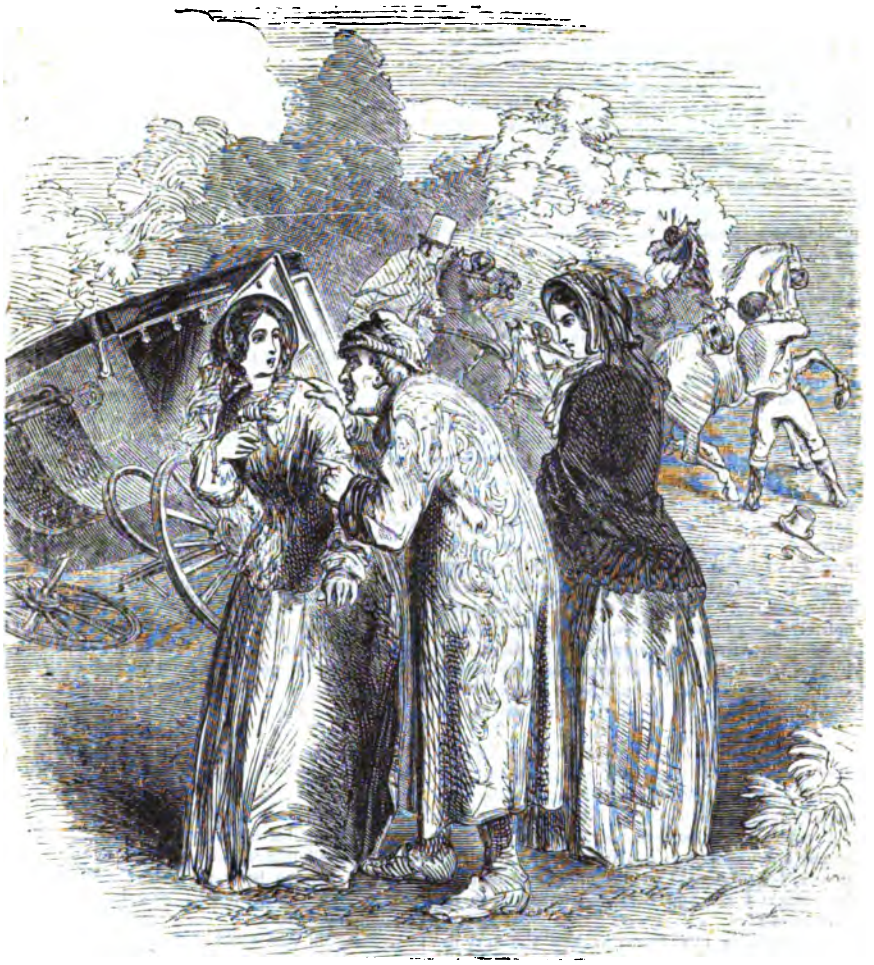
"Yes—you may," replied Mr. Sycamore, in his wonted languid indifferent manner: but just as Christian was about to leave the room, he said, "No! on second thoughts I'll take them myself. I shall be passing that way in my rambles; and I have got an inquiry to make about a letter which ought to have reached me here."

Christian issued from the hotel to take a walk; and he naturally reflected on all that had been done in reference to the letter-writing. He had certain misgivings in his mind: but yet he dared not allow them to obtain an immediate ascendancy over him. It looked very much as if the Hon. Mr. Sycamore had dictated in a particular sense, in order to impress the hotel-waiter with a grand idea of his finances, his acquaintances, and his general respectability, so that the hotel functionary might go and report everything to the landlord:—but, on the other hand, it might all be correct, legitimate, and straightforward enough, and nothing more reprehensible in the gentleman's mode of procedure than a love of ostentation and prideful display. At all events, Christian was resolved not to be too ready to jump at a conclusion, nor stand the chance of doing his employer an injustice by a rash and precipitate formation of opinion.

He repaired to the sands where the visitors were bathing: and at first he stood looking on, amidst other spectators, with a feeling of cheerfulness and a sense of exhilarating amusement. But by degrees our hero began to conceive strange notions respecting the delicacy of all that he saw before him. There were male bathers in a condition of perfect nudity within five or six yards of female bathers, who certainly were enveloped in long gowns, but they were so loose that they came open at the breast with every ripple of the sea and with every movement of the form. Then, too, the gentlemen were swimming about in all directions, performing a thousand evolutions *on* the water as well as in it,—floating on their stomachs and their backs—leaping high to dive down head foremost—or ascending the steps at the back of the machines in order to plunge off into the sea again. Then on the shore, too, Christian could not help observing that the ladies rambled or stood nearest to those points where the gentlemen were bathing. Some sate upon the sands pretending to be deeply absorbed in the novels which they held in their hands: but the pages were only turned at very long intervals, and the eyes which should have been bent upon them, were peering over at the flandering, swimming, leaping, diving, anticplaying gentlemen-bathers.

But if the ladies thus congregated near the places were those of the opposite sex were frolicking in the water, the gentlemen-spectators on the other hand seemed as if by accident—Oh, yes! quite by accident—to be lounging individually or collectively in little groups nearest to where the fair sex, like so many draped nereids, were disporting in the sun-lit sea. Many a fair bosom thus unveiled its beauties to the libertine regards devouringly fixed upon them:—glimpses of white glancing limbs were likewise caught as the fair bathers practised swimming by the aid of the guides, or as they ascended the steps of the machines on emerging from the water. Hoary old men riveted their gloating looks upon those charming bathers; and some even went so far or were so carried away by their libidinous feelings, as to raise their eye-glasses all the better to catch and devour the glimpses of those charms which were being continuously revealed to them. And the ladies knew full well that they were thus the objects of such earnest contemplation on the part of the gentlemen-spectators: but they exhibited no indignation—no blush of shame rose to their cheeks—no voice of offended modesty appealed to the guides to request that the insolent beholders might be desired to stand back.

As the consciousness that all these disgusting and scandalous indelicacies were being enacted before him, gradually dawned into the mind of Christian Ashton, he at first felt astonished: he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. Yet it was indeed but too true!—for there, in the broad daylight, with the sun's refulgence blazing upon the entire scene, was all this going on. Very fortunate was it for the proprietors of the machines that their bathers belonged to the well-to-do orders, numbering amongst them persons of rank, standing, and wealth. Oh! if those bathers had only belonged to the poorer classes, how the saints would have held up their hands and turned up the whites of their eyes! what tirades would have been heard from the pulpits of churches and from within the walls of



the Houses of Parliament! what fulminations and lamentations would there have been in respect to the immorality and profligacy of the working classes! Magistrates would have come down armed with all the powers of the law to prevent bathing altogether, and to plunge into ruin the owners of the machines: bishops and other legislators would have clamoured for additional legal enactments; and Exeter Hall would have echoed to the snivellings, the whinings, and the lugubrious lamentations of the "godly." Such would have been the case if those bathers belonged to the working class: but they formed a portion of the higher orders—those orders who are not merely privileged in respect to all political rights, but likewise privileged to enjoy all immoralities with the fullest impunity.

That feeling on Christian's part which had commenced with amazement and had progressed into incredulity as to the evidence of his own senses, terminated in disgust. He retired from the scene, and rambled through the town, marvelling that ladies and gentlemen of education, and who arrogate to themselves the credit of being the depositaries of all that is best in refinement, delicacy, and virtuous principle in this country, should thus scandalously forget themselves—or rather wilfully act in a manner that gave the lie to all their presumptuous boastings.

Several days passed: and every morning Christian was employed for about an hour-and-a-half in writing letters to Mr. Sycamore's dictation. These were to a variety of noblemen and gentlemen of position and wealth, and were couched in different degrees of intimacy and familiarity. Mr. Sycamore generally took them for the purpose of posting them himself: or else he gave them to his man James with the command to do so. Letters arrived from London in response to these: and Christian could not help thinking that Mr.

Sycamore was very negligent in allowing his correspondence to lie about on the table in his sitting-room.

Mr. Sycamore hired horses and equipages, and lived altogether in the style of a man of fortune. He picked up acquaintances—if he had not previously formed them—at Ramsgate: a lord or two dined with him—two or three baronets joined him at champagne breakfasts—he received invitations to parties—and by the time ten days had expired, he was the perfect star of the place. He seemed determined likewise that the tradespeople of Ramsgate should benefit by his presence: for, as he observed to Christian, "What was the use of having money unless to diffuse it fairly and do good with it?"

Acting upon this admirable principle, the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore was lavish in his orders. The jewellers, the tailors, the boot-makers, the perfumers, and the livery stable-keepers were speedily honoured with his patronage. But so far as the liberality of his custom went, the landlord of the Royal Hotel had no reason to complain: for the handsomest suite of apartments was retained by Mr. Sycamore—the costliest wines were daily put in ice for his table—the markets of Ramsgate did not furnish suitable dainties for his repast; and therefore the landlord was compelled to send large orders to London, and get down the choicest products of Billingsgate and Covent Garden for his customer's use. Christian's misgivings had almost entirely disappeared: and he honestly thought that he must have wronged his employer by them. For if Mr. Sycamore were not everything he seemed and represented, would he not be at once detected? would he be allowed to lead such a life as this without molestation?

One day, at the expiration of about a fortnight, the landlord of the Royal Hotel requested Christian to step into his private parlour; and begging him with the utmost civility take a seat, he said, "I entreat your pardon, Mr. Ashton, for the course I am adopting: but from what I have seen of you, I have formed an opinion that leads me to it. Might I ask how long you have known Mr. Sycamore?"

"I was only introduced to him the very day before we came down to Ramsgate. I advertised in the *Times* for a situation as private secretary to a nobleman or gentleman: Mr. Sycamore answered the advertisement—letters were exchanged between us—I called upon him—and received the appointment."

"And where was he staying, sir, at the time?" inquired the landlord.

Christian mentioned the hotel in Piccadilly; and he thought it right to add that Mr. Sycamore had lived there upwards of three months—that he had spent a vast amount of money—and that he had paid all his bills with the utmost liberality ere leaving the metropolis.

The landlord's countenance brightened up; and after a little reflection, he said, "I am sure you will pardon me, Mr. Ashton, for thus boldly questioning you; but the truth is, we do get bitten sometimes by gentlemen who cut a dash and live extravagantly. Mr. Sycamore however *does* seem a regular gentleman: but there are one or two little circumstances which did cause me some uneasiness. The first is that in my waiter's hearing, and on the very first morning after his arrival, he dictated a letter to his London bankers, ordering them to remit him a considerable sum: and I happened to learn by inquiry at our Ramsgate bankers, that they have as yet received no advices to any such effect. Another circumstance is that none of the friends who visit him here were ever acquainted with him before. I ventured to ask Sir William Gregory this morning who Mr. Sycamore is. Because of course as he is an Honourable, he must be a peer's son; but Sir William himself seemed struck by the question, declaring that he had never thought of the matter before. Perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Ashton, who Mr. Sycamore's father is—or to what noble family he belongs?"

"Really," replied Christian, "I can only say as Sir William Gregory appears to have answered you, that I never thought of the matter before."

"You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the landlord, "there are two noblemen and three or four baronets who visit Mr. Sycamore: but between you and me, they are not at all likely to trouble themselves as to who or what he is, so long as he gives splendid champagne breakfasts and dinners."

"I can assure you," responded Christian, in some degree of affright, "that if there be anything wrong I am totally innocent——"

"I know you are," interrupted the landlord; "and that is the reason I took the liberty of questioning you. I saw at once that you were a well-conducted young gentleman—you live so quietly—you never take any wine—you do not avail yourself of your employer's permission that you are to have whatever you choose. Mind, I don't say there *is* anything wrong; and all you have told me about Mr. Sycamore's mode of life in London at the Picadilly Hotel, has eased me considerably. Prudence however suggests that I should make a little further inquiry. By the bye," exclaimed the landlord, "what if I were to write up to those London bankers of his? At all events, Mr. Ashton, you will not tell him that I have been questioning you."

"Not for the world!" responded our young hero.

At this moment the parlour door opened; and Mr. Sycamore lounged in with his wonted fashionable ease; and perceiving Christian there, he said, "Ah! Mr. Ashton, having a little chat with the landlord—eh?"

"Yes, sir," stammered Christian: and he rose to leave the room.

"Don't go—don't go," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore: "it's no secret. You are acquainted with all my affairs," he added with a laugh, "in your capacity of my private secretary."

Still Christian was moving towards the door, as he thought that the business might not concern him: but Mr. Sycamore, with an appearance of kind playfulness and urbane familiarity, said, "Really you need not go: for I repeat, I have no secrets that you are not acquainted with."

Christian was therefore compelled to remain; and Mr. Sycamore, depositing himself with easy indolence upon a chair, said, "Landlord, this is an admirable hotel of yours, and I have been doing my best to recommend it—but all to tiptop people, mind!—no low persons will ever seek your establishment through any hint or suggestion from me. Ashton can tell you that I am very particular on that score—devilish particular."

"Of course, sir," observed the hotel-proprietor; "every gentleman is."

"I should think so indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Sycamore: "or else what would become of us?—damme, what would become of us?"

The landlord shook his head solemnly, as if inwardly repeating the question which had been put in so earnest a manner; and then he appeared lost in the wide field of speculation which it had opened to his mental view.

"By the bye," resumed Mr. Sycamore, after a pause, "you will have to keep a suite of rooms from Monday next for six weeks. They are for my friend Lord Toddington, from whom I have this morning received a letter to tell me that he is coming. You remember, Ashton, I told you his lordship was certain to come? Ah, here is his letter:"—and Mr. Sycamore tossed it to the landlord as he spoke.

The hotel-proprietor took and read it; and his countenance exhibited a brightening satisfaction at what he evidently regarded as a proof of Mr. Sycamore's sincerity.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the apartments shall be kept—and I thank you for the recommendation. His lordship, I perceive, is coming with his cousin the Hon. Captain Highflyer and his nephew Mr. Skelter: they will all be attended with their valets—and there are likewise three grooms to provide for."

"That's just it," said Mr. Sycamore; "and you perceive that his lordship requires breakfast, dining, and drawing-rooms. Damme, we shall have a fine time of it! Toddington is a devil of a fellow to drink champagne—and so is Highflyer: but Skelter will punish the burgundy. Ah, by the bye! that reminds me of something I had to suggest. You must be very careful about your burgundy: Skelter is an excellent judge—and if he *does* take a fancy to it, he'll drink three or four bottles a day."

"I think, sir," remarked the hotel-proprietor, deferentially, "that you are enabled to pass an opinion upon my burgundy?"

"Yes—I think I may venture to say that it *is* excellent," responded Mr. Sycamore. "Well, then, Ashton, we must write to his lordship presently, and tell him that the rooms are engaged. Ah, by the bye, landlord, you will have to find stabling-accommodation for four horses, as you see by that letter."

"It shall be done, sir," was the hotel-proprietor's answer: and he proceeded to make certain memoranda in his books.

The Hon. Talbot Sycamore rose from his seat, and was lounging towards the door,—when apparently stricken with a sudden thought, he exclaimed, "Ah, by the bye, Ashton, just run up to the bank and inquire whether they have received a letter of advice about my remittances. I can't make out how the delay has been: it's too bad of those fellows in London—and all the worse because I am their private friend as well as their customer. They are no doubt overwhelmed with business: but if they don't pay more attention they will very soon lose it; and I for one don't mean to stand any nonsense. I'll close my account and cut them dead, if the money has not been sent by this last post."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sycamore looked uncommonly fierce, as if he had just come to a resolve which was perfectly inexorable, and from which he would not suffer himself to be moved even if all the partners in the London banking-firm went down upon their knees at his feet.

Christian Ashton hastened off to make the inquiry at the Ramsgate banker's; and the Hon. Talbot Sycamore loungingly resumed his chair,—saying, "I'll just wait here till my private secretary returns; and you shall give me a glass of that famous liqueur of your's that you sent up to us last evening."

The hotel-proprietor,—who had much approved of the firm and manly conduct of Mr. Sycamore in respect to the mode of dealing with his negligent London bankers,—displayed considerable alacrity in ringing the bell and ordering in the choice liqueur of which Mr. Sycamore had spoken. This gentleman quaffed a glass with the air of a connoisseur; and as he began to sip a second, he said, "I tell you what it is, landlord—there is not finer liqueur in all England than this. Toddington will like it"—another sip—"Highflyer will like it"—another sip—"and damme, Skelter will like it!"—and the last sip drained the glass.

In a few minutes Christian Ashton returned, with a visible expression of disappointment upon his features.

"Well, what news?" inquired Mr. Sycamore. "Am I to use harsh measures with those careless London bankers of mine? or am I to give them back all my confidence?"

"I am very much afraid, sir," responded our young hero, "that you will have to adopt the former course."

"Then, damme, I'll rush up to London at once!" exclaimed the Hon. Talbot Sycamore, starting from his chair with indignation depicted on his countenance. "I'll take the next train—I'll go to the bank—I'll order all my funds to be paid over to their great rivals, Pump, Aldgate, and Co.—I'll close my account—and, damme, I'll horsewhip the head of the firm and blacken the eyes of the chief cashier."

While giving vent to these dreadful threats, Mr. Sycamore appeared to be worked up into a towering passion; and the hotel-proprietor being convinced of the genuine sincerity of all his customer's proceedings since he had seen Lord Toddington's letter, ventured to intercede on behalf of the London bankers,—adding that perhaps another letter, written in very strong terms, might bring them to their senses—or that perhaps it would answer the same purpose if Mr. Ashton were sent up to London?

"To be sure!" cried Mr. Sycamore, suffering himself to be appeased to a certain extent. "I don't see why I should put myself out of the way for these careless negligent fellows. We'll just write them another letter, Ashton; and if that don't answer the purpose, you shall cut off to London the day after to-morrow, with full powers from me to close my account, thrash the principal, and pummel the cashier."

Our young hero expressed his readiness to undertake the journey to the metropolis whenever called upon: but he thought it as well to abstain from pledging himself with regard to the thrashing and pummeling process.

"Come, Ashton," said his employer, "we will go and write this letter to the bankers, and also the one to my friend Toddington about the apartments. Oh, by the bye," added Mr. Sycamore, turning back from the door as he was about to open it, "just cash my cheque, landlord, for a couple of hundred. I shall date it the day after to-morrow, by which time my funds are certain to be here: or if you have a payment to make in the metropolis, I can of course draw it at sight on my London bankers."

The hotel-proprietor looked somewhat blank at the Hon. Talbot Sycamore's proposition: but that gloominess passed away in an instant, as divers considerations swept through his mind. There was Lord Toddington's letter promising a rich harvest for six weeks: the recommendations of Mr. Sycamore were very certain not to end there: but if he were offended he would leave the hotel himself, and prevent all his aristocratic acquaintances from taking up their quarters there in future.

"He *must* be all right," said the landlord to himself, as a sequel to those rapid musings: but still he thought that in respect to the required amount he might accomplish a prudential compromise. "It would really give me infinite pleasure, Mr. Sycamore," he observed, now speaking aloud, "to comply with your request——"

"Oh, it don't matter in the least!" exclaimed the gentleman, with an air of the most perfect indifference. "Ashton can run up to London by the next train—he will be down early to-morrow forenoon: and then all will be right. But I *do* know that at the hotel over the way they never refuse to cash a gentleman's cheque—damme, never!"

"Beg your pardon, sir—really did not mean to offend—did not for a moment think of refusing," said the frightened landlord; "but was only about to hint that my own account happens to be very low at my bankers'—and if a hundred pounds would suffice——"

"No—it don't matter," said Mr. Sycamore: and he was again lounging towards the door, when he turned back, observing, "Well, I'll draw the cheque—I want some loose gold for to-day."

The hotel-proprietor hastened to furnish writing-materials; and while Christian drew a cheque to Mr. Sycamore's dictation, the landlord drew another at his own desk. Mr. Sycamore appended his signature to the first-named draft; and receiving the landlord's cheque, he despatched Ashton to the Ramsgate bank for the cash. As our young hero was proceeding along the street, he observed that James the groom was following him: but he thought it was merely accidental, and that the man was going in the same direction, either for a walk or on some business of his own. But on issuing forth from the bank, Christian found James lurking about at the door, and now looking as if he were anxious to speak to him. Our young hero accordingly stopped: the groom accosted him, and with a touch of the hat, observed, "Beg pardon, Mr. Ashton—but I s'pose you've been to the bank to get money?"

"Yes," replied Christian, though in a cold and distant manner, for he thought the question impertinent. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for nothink partickler, sir!" responded James. "It's all right:"—and he turned to hasten away.

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Christian. "You must have some reason for making such an inquiry. I suppose your master does not owe you any wages?"

"Not he, indeed, sir!" cried the groom: "he is always in adwance rayther than t'otherwise. Only I knowed there was some little delay about master's money—and I was glad to think the matter was put right. You see, Mr. Ashton," added James, with a look and a tone of mysterious confidence, "master is so negligent about his money-affairs—and it all comes of being too rich! Them London bankers of his'n takes the adwantage of him: and if I was him I'd cut 'em dead—that I would!"

Having thus spoken with a very determined air, James pressed down his hat fiercely upon his head, and looked very much as if he wished he had the chief of the London banking firm then and there in his presence, that he might inflict summary chastisement upon him. He walked slowly away; and Christian returned to the hotel. There he handed the money to his employer, who proceeded to dictate a very angry letter indeed to his London bankers—and then a very familiar one to his intimate friend Lord Toddington.

"Shall I take them to the post?" asked Christian,—which was the question he invariably put, but to which he had hitherto as invariably received a negative response.

On the present occasion, however, the Hon. Talbot Sycamore said that he might take them to the post; and thither he proceeded accordingly. He had forgotten to ask whether his services would be required any more for that day; and, having posted the letters, he hastened back to put the inquiry. On ascending towards Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, he was just about to enter, when his ear caught so strange an observation from within, that he stopped short. The door happened to be ajar; and it was the dapper groom's voice that was making the observation.

"Come, none of this nonsense! I know you have got plenty of blunt—young Ashton told me so—and you must fork over twenty at least."

"I tell you, James," replied Mr. Sycamore, "that I could only manage to get a hundred pounds—and you must satisfy yourself with ten."

"Well, I s'pose I must, then," said the groom in a sulky tone: and Christian heard the chinking of gold. "But I say, how long's the game to last now?" inquired James.

"Hush, damn you! the door's open!" rejoined Sycamore in a low savage voice.

Christian glided away with a sensation as if he were walking in a dream. He was in a complete state of consternation and dismay; and he mechanically issued forth from the hotel. He was, as it were, an automaton moved only by an influence which was independent at the time of his own volition. When he gradually began to collect himself, he found that he was walking on the pier; and he felt as if he had been taken up from the hotel and set down there by some invisible hand: for he had not the slightest recollection of why or how he had come thither at all. In a word, it was as if he were now awaking out of a dream in which he had been walking.

He proceeded to reflect upon what he had so recently heard; and it was with a species of bewildering terror that he thus meditated. That his employer was a rank swindler, there could be no doubt; and that James was in league with him, was equally certain. Christian recollected that the dapper groom had on more occasions than one sought to enter into discourse with him, and had invariably expatiated upon his master's wealth, standing, and aristocratic acquaintances.

"And all this was done," thought Christian to himself, with mingled indignation and bitterness, "that I might in my turn puff off my employer whenever questioned with regard to him. But what am I to do? shall I at once unmask him?"

Our young hero felt that this was his duty: and yet there was the lingering apprehension in his mind that he himself might be suddenly turned round upon and accused as an accomplice.

"But no," he said within himself, after further reflection; "it is impossible that I can become thus compromised! The landlord of the hotel told me that he felt persuaded I am an honourable young man. Good heavens! to think that I should have thus become the tool and instrument of a vile adventurer!"

Our hero's mind was made up; and he retraced his way to the hotel, with the determination of speaking to the landlord. But on inquiring for him, Christian was informed that he had gone up to London by the train half-an-hour previously.

"Then," thought Christian to himself, "he has doubtless set off to make his own inquiries: he will be back either late to-night or early to-morrow—and a few hours' delay will make no great difference."

Christian again issued from the hotel, and wandered forth, painfully reflecting on the discovery he had made with regard to his employer. As the hour approached at which he was wont to dine, he was resolved not to increase on his own account that hotel bill which he felt assured would never be paid by Mr. Sycamore; and he repaired to a tavern, where he ordered some refreshments. It was a third-rate hostelry; and the coffee-room was fitted with boxes in the old-fashioned style. At the moment Christian entered, only one of these boxes was occupied; and this was by two men, somewhat plainly though not shabbily dressed, and who were discussing cold beef and porter. Christian sat down in the next box, and took up a newspaper until his dinner was brought in.

"So they say he dines at half-past six and won't be in till then—is that it?" observed one of the men to his companion: and though they spoke in a low voice, yet Christian could not possibly help overhearing what was said.

"I have already told you so once," was the response given in a sulky growling tone: "but you are such a chap for making a feller repeat the same thing over and over again!"

"Every one who knows honest Ike Shadbolt," remarked the first speaker, when he had refreshed himself with a deep draught out of the pewter pot, "gives him credit for prudence and circumspection. I tell you what it is, friend Withers;—when two gentlemen like you and me have got a delicate business of this here nature in hand, we must put our heads together to conduct it in the nicest, pleasantest, comfortablest way:"—then, after a pause, he asked, "Does nothing strike you?"

"What the deuce should strike me," growled the individual whose name appeared to be Withers, "except that we've got to do a certain job at half-past six?"

"But look you, friend Withers," resumed Mr. Shadbolt, "there are two ways of doing a thing—one with a rumpus, and one without it. This customer of our's that we've come down after, has no doubt got plenty of ready tin; and why not so conduct ourselves that a little of it shall find its way into our pockets?"

"How so?" asked Mr. Withers, who seemed to be speaking with a mouth very full of bread and beef.

"How so!" echoed Mr. Shadbolt contemptuously: "was there ever such a feller——"

"Well, then, why don't you speak out plain?" growlingly demanded Mr. Withers, who might possibly have been a very excellent member of society, but who certainly appeared to be afflicted with a most unamiable temper.

"Five words will explain," was Mr. Shadbolt's response. "If we make a public affair of it—announce ourselves at the hotel—put on handcuffs—and drag our customer up to the railway station like a felon, he won't thank us—will he? And not thanking us, he won't give us each five guineas as a reward for our civility? Answer me that."

"What the devil answer does it require?" sulkily demanded Mr. Withers: "the thing speaks far itself."

"To be sure it does!" continued Mr. Shadbolt: "and so does the next proposition I am going to submit to your consideration. What if we do the thing quite genteel,—just introduce ourselves as Mr. Smith and Mr. Noakes—two gentlemen come down on very particular business indeed to see the Hon. Mr. Talbot Sycamore——I say, did that young chap start there in the next box?"

"Not he," growled Mr. Withers: "he is reading the paper, and can't hear what we are saying. But you'd better make an end of this long talk of yours."

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, "I was saying if we do the thing quite genteel—see our customer alone—whisper in his ear a pressing invitation to accompany us to London—let him pay for the three first-class places—and put him quite at his ease the whole way,—don't you think he's very likely to make us a compliment? Just leave it to me, and I'll give him such a hint that we'll get our tip beforehand."

"Well, do as you like," answered Mr. Withers, unbending somewhat from the sullen dignity in which he was previously wrapped up close. "You're a cunning fellow, Ike—and as you say, I don't see why we shouldn't blend profit with business."

"That's so sensible a remark," observed Mr. Shadbolt, "that we'll have another pot on the strength of it:"—and he rang the bell accordingly.

The waiter appeared at the instant,—bringing in Christian's dinner: but when it was placed before our young hero, he could not eat a morsel. He saw that the crisis was at hand: his employer was evidently about to be arrested on some serious charge of felony; and these were London police-officers who had come down for the purpose. As for giving Mr. Sycamore a warning instruction, such an idea did not for a moment enter young Ashton's head:—so far from defeating justice under such circumstances, he felt himself bound to do all he could to further its aims.

Christian looked up at the clock in the coffee-room: it was just five,—and therefore in another hour and a half Mr. Sycamore would be in custody. The conversation in the adjoining box had been temporarily suspended, from the fact that, the second pot of porter having been discussed, Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers had just began to regale themselves with glasses of hot rum-and-water; and it apparently took them some little time to arrive, by dint of divers sippings and tastings, at a conclusion as to whether the compound was to their liking or not.

"What a rum feller that chap Sycamore appears to be by all accounts!" said Mr. Shadbolt, at length breaking that interval of silence. "What a game he was carrying on at the hotel in Piccadilly—what is its name again?—before he got that forged bill cashed."

"A game indeed!" growled Mr. Withers. "But how do you account for this,—that when he did get it cashed, he took and paid all his debts and came off like a gentleman when he might have bolted away with all the blunt?"

"Why, don't you see," responded Shadbolt, "it was a three months' bill; and he never thought the forgery would be detected till it came due. So no doubt his plan was to enjoy life in the meantime. But if he had left London without paying his debts, he would have been blown upon. I dare say he meant to pay the watering-places a visit one after the other; and at each he would of course refer to the Piccadilly Hotel—what's its name again?—as a proof of his respectability."

Christian felt so sick and dizzy at all he had heard, and likewise in consequence of the excitement through which he had for the few previous hours been passing, that he could not remain in the hot stifling coffee-room any longer. He accordingly paid his bill, and departed. He walked out upon the pier to reflect upon the course he ought to adopt,—whether he should at once proceed to the Royal Hotel, pack up his box, and depart—or whether he should await the expected catastrophe. He was apprehensive that if he adopted the former course, it might be subsequently imagined he had been all along Sycamore's accomplice, and that he fled from the presence of impending danger the moment he heard of it. But while he was yet deliberating within himself, he suddenly perceived Mr. Sycamore advancing along the pier, in company with a couple of the fashionable acquaintances whom he had formed at Ramsgate. A sudden thought flashed to Christian's mind, and he resolved to act upon it.

CHAPTER LXII.

SIR JOSEPH STEWARD.

APPROACHING the group, who had stopped to gaze upon a vessel in the distance, our hero said in a cold firm voice, "Mr. Sycamore, I wish to have a few moments' conversation with you."

"With me! What about?" exclaimed that individual. "Don't you see I am engaged with friends for the present? Damme, man, I'm engaged!"

"Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, "that which I have to say to you, will admit of no delay."

"Oh, ah—I see!" ejaculated our hero's employer: and turning to his friends, he said in an easy off-hand manner, "It is about some little business that I entrusted to my private secretary. Excuse me for a few minutes: I will speedily rejoin you."

Christian allowed the falsehood about the "little private business" to pass unnoticed; and he moved away from the spot. Sycamore was almost immediately by his side; and he said in a hurried anxious voice, "What is it, Ashton?—why the deuce do you look so serious?"

"I cannot speak to you here," responded Christian. "I will thank you to accompany me to the hotel."

"But what is it?" demanded Sycamore, who did not dare be angry; for he saw that there was indeed something ominously wrong.

Christian made no answer—but led the way straight to the hotel,—Sycamore walking by his side, and continuing to ask what it all meant, but without receiving a single syllable in reply. In a very few minutes the hotel was reached: Christian proceeded straight up to his employer's sitting-room; and when they were both there alone together, Mr. Sycamore said, "Now will you tell me what the deuce you mean by this strange conduct on your part?"

"Simply this," answered Ashton,—"that it does not suit me to remain any longer in your employment; and I require a written acknowledgment to the effect that our acquaintance has only lasted a fortnight—that it commenced under certain circumstances—and that it is of my own accord I at this particular hour insist on severing our connexion."

Sycamore's countenance grew more and more blank, and his manner more and more nervous, as our hero went on speaking. He nevertheless exerted every effort to veil his confusion and his misgivings, which indeed amounted to terror: but he could not succeed—and in a trembling voice he said, "But my dear Ashton——"

"Address me not, sir, in so familiar a manner!" exclaimed our young hero, indignantly: "do not ask me another question—but sit down at once and pen such a document as I have suggested."

"One word—and only one word!" cried the trembling villain. "Something must have been said—you must have heard something——"

"At all events I have seen enough," interrupted Christian, "to be only too anxious that our connexion should be severed."

"The people of the hotel—have they said anything to you?" asked Sycamore.

"Nothing more has been said to me since I left your presence in the forenoon:"—and then it struck Christian that if he left Mr. Sycamore in a state of fearful uncertainty, he might suddenly abscond,—in which case justice would be cheated of its due, and he himself would have given that very warning intimation which he had resolved not to afford. He accordingly went on to say, "I see through you, Mr. Sycamore; and that is the reason I choose to leave you. But for my own character's sake I am determined to have such a certificate or acknowledgment as that which I have described."

"You see through me?" Sycamore repeated involuntarily: for he was trembling and quivering, and his senses were almost lost under the influence of terror. "But the people of the hotel——"

"They doubtless continue in the same happy state of credulity," answered Christian, "as that into which you have succeeded in lulling them? Now, sir, without further delay, give me the document."

"But what use will you make of it?" asked Sycamore, who for an instant thought of bullying and blustering: but the next moment he felt that he had better not—for Christian's demeanour was firm and resolute.

"The only use I shall make of it," replied the young man, "is that if ever a word be uttered aspersing my character in connexion with your name, I shall at one produce that document."

Mr. Sycamore appeared to be relieved somewhat by this assurance: yet still he required another one;—and he said in a voice of abject entreaty, "You will not, Mr. Ashton—you will not breathe a disparaging word——"

"I promise you that I shall not meddle unnecessarily in your affairs," interrupted Christian. "The first thing to-morrow morning I shall leave Ramsgate."

"Oh! of course I shall pay you the money that is due to you," cried Mr. Sycamore, who began to breathe more freely: and he even resumed somewhat of his jaunty air of indifference.

"Not a shilling!" ejaculated Christian. "I would not touch a single farthing of the money which you have in your possession!—and I will thank you to add to the document that I thus positively renounce every fraction in the shape of salary or remuneration."

"Well, just as you like," observed Mr. Sycamore, half sullenly, half flippantly: and then, as he sate down at the writing-table, he added with an ironical smile, "It is now for you to dictate and for me to wield the pen."

Christian took no notice of this species of sarcastic jest: but he began to dictate a document in the sense which he had already sketched forth,—rendering the terms altogether exculpatory of himself with regard to complicity in whatsoever misdeeds might subsequently transpire in respect to his employer. Sycamore winced considerably beneath this infliction—for such to all intents and purposes it was. Once or twice he looked up into Christian's countenance: but he beheld firm resoluteness there; and he was compelled to write on unto the end. When he had finished and signed the document, Christian read it carefully over—folded it up—and placed it in his pocket.

"You really don't mean me any mischief?" said Mr. Sycamore, again adopting a tone of entreaty.

"Whatever promises I have made you," answered our hero, "shall be faithfully fulfilled."

He then issued from the room; and descending to the bar of the hotel, said to the young female who kept the accounts in the landlord's absence, "Can you make me out a bill altogether separate from that of Mr. Sycamore?"

"Certainly I can, sir," she replied, with a look of amazement. "But why do you ask the question?"

"Because I have resigned my situation with Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian: "and as I intend to leave the hotel to-morrow morning, it suits my arrangements with Mr. Sycamore to settle my own account off-hand."

"In that case, sir," answered the bar-maid, "your bill shall be made out. But I hope that there has been no sudden disagreement—nothing unpleasant——"

"Do not say another word now," interrupted Christian: "and I will take an opportunity of letting you know all about it a little later."

He then repaired to his own room, where he began to pack up his things in preparation for departure in the morning.

Meanwhile Mr. Sycamore had been left in no very enviable state of feeling: for he could not rightly conjecture the cause of Christian's conduct. Indeed he knew not whether it were better to decamp at once—or whether he might venture to remain at the hotel until the first thing in the morning—at which time he had already come to the determination of departing likewise. After having taken two or three agitated and uneasy turns to and fro in the room, he rang the bell and desired that his man James might be ordered to step up to him.

"Well, James," said Mr. Sycamore, as soon as his accomplice made his appearance, "things seem to be taking an awkward aspect——But are you sure you have shut the door?"

"Yes, yes—the door's shut fast enow," answered James. "But how do you mean that things is looking orkard? Where's the orkardness?"

"I mean that young Ashton has suddenly left me," responded Sycamore; "and he said as plainly as he could speak that he has seen through me."

"How could he have found out anythink?" asked James. "Did he suspect that you yourself answered them letters which was written to Dukes, Marquisses, and Earls, bankers and Baronets; and that I sent up them answers of your'n in a parcel to my brother in London to be posted there?"

"I don't know how he came to suspect," replied Sycamore impatiently: "but I do know that the case is getting devilish serious."

"But you meant to leave to-morrow morning," said James: "it was agreed upon 'twixt you and me that our quarters was to be shifted."

"Yes," exclaimed Sycamore; "because I reckoned upon what this evening's business might produce. Here have I got hold of two young chaps with plenty of money—I have already ascertained that they are ready to take a hand at cards or rattle the dice—a splendid little dinner is ordered—I should ply them with champagne—I should get them into a nice train—and I know deuced well it would be worth a couple of thousand—perhaps more. Then away to Dover to-morrow—and off to Boulogne! That was the plan: but how the deuce I'm to act now, I can't for the life of me decide."

"You must risk it," answered James. "Everything seems right enough amongst the hotel-people—though by the bye I did hear that the landlord is gone up to London: but he can't very well get back again till to-morrow—and by the time he comes we may be far away."

"Ah! but there is such a thing as sending down a telegraphic message!" ejaculated Mr. Sycamore, with a sudden consternation upon his features.

"By jingo, aye!" cried James, looking equally discomfited. "I never thought of them galvanic wires which talks eighty or a hundred mile at a stretch."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Sycamore, pacing the room in agitation and bewilderment. "To have to bolt with a beggarly hundred guineas in one's pocket, would be a wretched affair indeed!"

"Why didn't you follow my advice," asked James, sullenly, "and bolt from the hotel in Piccadilly when you got the five hundred pounds? What the devil was the use of paying all them debts——"

"You know what my calculations were," answered Sycamore impatiently. "I thought that we should come down here with such a good name that by this time I might have hooked thousands out of the young fellows at play: and now, just as the opportunity is serving, the storm begins to gather as dark as possible."

"Well, but does young Ashton mean to peach?" inquired the dapper groom: "that's the pint."

"No—I don't think he does: and yet there is something strange and mysterious in his conduct which I cannot altogether understand."

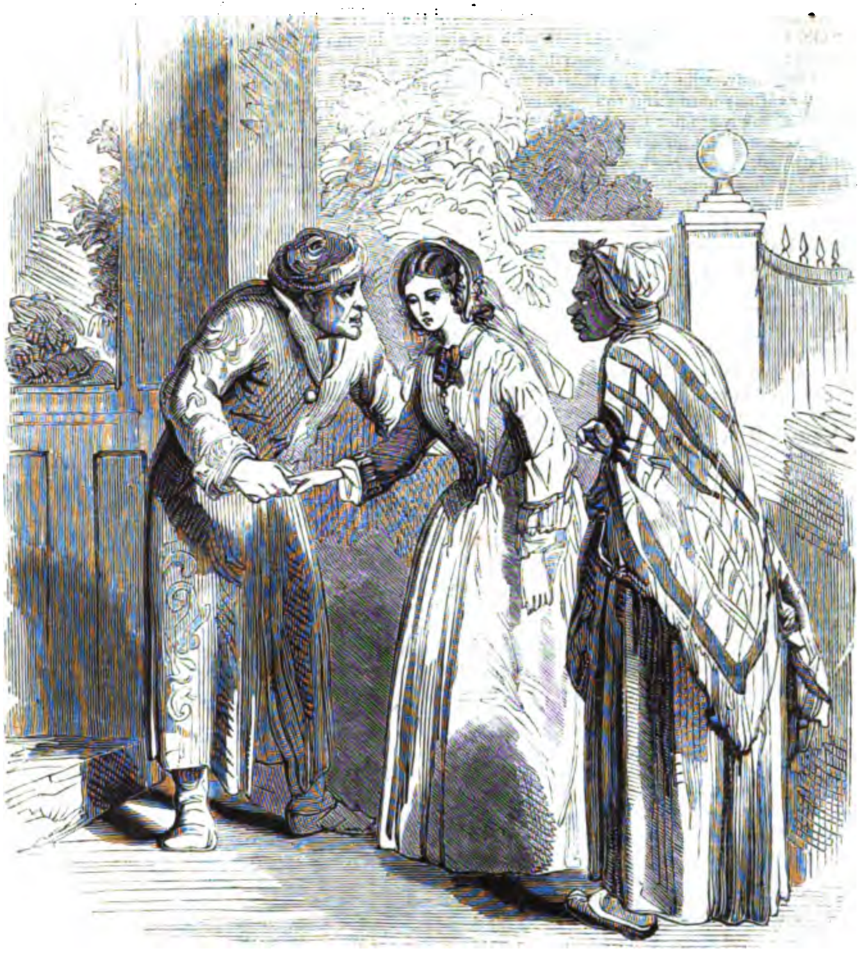
"Never mind the strangeness!" responded the groom: "you must run the risk. Let the dinner go on—let the young chaps come—do you feather your nest—and we'll make a bolt of it precious early in the morning. You've got loads of jewellery and different things that you can carry away easy enough; and as for the clothes, they must of course be left behind."

Mr. Sycamore reflected for a few minutes; and then said, "Well, James, it must be as you have suggested: the dinner shall go on—and we will risk it."

In the meanwhile Christian Ashton, having given his instructions to the bar-maid in respect to his bill, issued from the hotel to ramble about and commune with himself. He bitterly regretted that he had ever entered the employment of such a person as Mr. Sycamore: he blamed himself for want of prudence and caution in having adhered to his engagement after his suspicions were first awakened at the hotel in Piccadilly. But it was unfortunately too late thus to remonstrate with himself; and his repinings were useless. He had made up his mind, as the reader has seen, to discharge his own account at the hotel, and thus prove that his principles were upright;—and we must observe that he had an ample supply of ready money, inasmuch as a comparatively small inroad had been made upon the fifty guineas presented to him by Mr. Redcliffe after the affair at Oaklands several months back. He resolved to remain absent from the hotel until after Mr. Sycamore's arrest; as he did not wish to be present to have the appearance of triumphing in the downfall of that individual.

He roamed beyond the precincts of Ramsgate, out into the country: but so absorbed was he in his reflections, that his walk was prolonged to even a greater distance than he had first intended. The fields through which he had been proceeding, brought him towards the high road; and he sate upon a stile to rest himself ere he began to retrace his way. About a hundred yards off stood a house of handsome appearance, having a flower-garden enclosed with iron railings in front—and with a kitchen garden, shrubbery, paddock, and other grounds in the rear. The habitation stood all alone; and Christian was just wondering to himself in a sort of abstracted manner who dwelt there, when his ear suddenly caught the sounds of an equipage advancing along the road at a rapid rate. It was a travelling carriage with four horses; and as it whirled by the spot where Christian was resting himself, he caught a transient glimpse of two ladies seated inside. One of them appeared to be of exceeding beauty, so far as he could judge by that passing look: but he had no opportunity of particularly noticing the features of the other. Scarcely however had the equipage thus dashed by, when there was a sudden crash—the postilions shouted out—and the horses began to plunge. The hinder axle of the carriage had broken; and the vehicle itself had only been saved from completely upsetting by falling against the high bank which bordered the road on the opposite side to that where Christian was placed. Screams thrilled from within the carriage; and in a moment our young hero was flying towards the spot to render his assistance.

The postilions were so busily occupied in restraining their frightened horses, that they could not at once help in extricating the ladies from the interior of the carriage; and, therefore Christian's prompt appearance on the scene of the accident was most opportune. He hastened to open the door which was uppermost; and to his hastily put inquiry, he received the assurance that the two ladies had experienced no more serious inconvenience than the sudden shock and the accompanying alarm had occasioned. He aided them to descend: his idea of the beauty of one was immediately confirmed; and he now perceived that the other was as handsome and as commanding in appearance as the former was more delicately and youthfully charming. But he had not many moments to contemplate the ladies, nor to reiterate the expression of his hope that they had sustained no injury, ere another individual appeared upon the scene. This was an elderly gentleman, who with half-shuffling half-hobbling gait had issued forth from the house which Christian was a few minutes back so much admiring. He was one of the oddest looking beings that our hero had ever beheld, with the single exception perhaps of the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles. He was enveloped in a flowered silk dressing-gown of the gayest pattern: a cap of the same material contrasted strangely with his gray hair and his coarse,



sensual, forbidding features. His feet, which had a gouty appearance, were thrust into loose slippers; and though it was now past six o'clock in the evening, yet it seemed—to judge by his apparel—as if this singular old man had only just got out of bed.

The lady to whom we have alluded as being of a fine and commanding beauty, was about thirty years of age; and her handsome countenance had a bold and resolute expression. Her companion whom we have described as beautiful, was at least ten years younger. The former had dark hair and eyes—the latter brown hair and blue eyes. Immediately upon the old man approaching this group, exclamations of recognition were exchanged by himself and the elder lady—at the same time that they shook hands.

"My dear Mrs. Oxenden, what an accident! what a way to arrive at your old friend's house!" ejaculated the elderly gentleman, with an air of the deepest concern.

"It is fortunate that the accident should have occurred close by your door, Sir Joseph," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "or else we might have had a long and tedious walk."

Christian observed that while these observations were being exchanged, the young and beautiful lady appeared to be suddenly stricken with a sort of dismay. She started—she looked in wild bewilderment upon the shuffling, shambling old man—and then she stood transfixed with consternation and painful wonderment. Christian was himself astonished at the effect thus produced upon her: and in the confusion of his own thoughts, he was about to ask if anything had distressed or frightened her, when the old man, having first bent a devouring regard upon the young lady, fixed his looks suspiciously upon our hero.

"This young gentleman," Mrs. Oxenden hastened to observe, "is not one of our party: he is a stranger—and he came forward most kindly to render us his assistance."

"Oh, very good!" said the old man with an air of relief: and then he again turned his eyes upon the young lady, who became pale as death and seemed as if she were about to faint.

"We thank you most sincerely, sir," said Mrs. Oxenden, turning towards our hero, but with a certain impatience in her air, as if she felt him to be one too many upon the spot and wished him to be gone.

He dared not remain any longer—he had no excuse: he accordingly raised his hat; and was turning away when he perceived that the young lady gave a half-start as if she would have flown towards him for protection.

"Laura, do not be foolish!" said Mrs. Oxenden, in an under-tone, but with rapid and peremptory utterance: and she caught the young lady by the arm, at the same time bending upon her a look of almost menacing significancy with her imperious dark eyes. "This is Sir Joseph Steward."

A low faint shriek, coming from the lips of the beautiful but afflicted Laura, caught Christian's ear as he was again turning from the spot;—and again under an irresistible influence of pity and compassion for that young lady, did he stop short. Mrs. Oxenden now darted upon him a look full of anger, and she said, "Your presence, sir, becomes an intrusion effacing the sense of gratitude for the assistance you rendered."

Christian's countenance grew crimson at this rebuke so pointed and almost insolent; and he hastened away from the spot. But on reaching the stile, he glanced back; and at that instant Sir Joseph Steward was addressing something to the young lady. He had laid one hand familiarly upon her shoulder; and with the pointed forefinger of the other hand he was gesticulating as if to convey impressiveness to the words he was uttering. Laura was shrinking in visible terror and dismay—while Mrs. Oxenden, who stood behind the old man, was bending upon her a look of mingled reproach and command. This was the spectacle which met our hero's eyes,—filling him with renewed wonderment and compassion, and for a few moments riveting him to the spot whence he contemplated what was thus passing. But again did he catch the dark eyes of Mrs. Oxenden flashing an angry glance towards him; and struck with the impropriety of thus obtrusively seeming to meddle with other persons' business, he began to take his hurried way back across the fields.

While retracing his steps to Ramsgate, which was about three miles distant—for, as we have already said, he had wandered much farther than he intended when first setting out for his walk—he naturally pondered all that had just taken place. Profound was his pity on behalf of that young and beautiful lady who had evidently been introduced to Sir Joseph Steward for the first time, and who had shrunk with so much surprise, aversion, and dismay at his presence. What could it all mean?—was some compulsory marriage in contemplation? or was anything worse intended? Christian half regretted that he had not lingered upon the spot to ascertain whether he could really render any assistance to a young lady against whom he feared an outrage of some kind or another was being contemplated. While thus reflecting, he beheld a milk-woman advancing across the field; and he resolved to question her. As an introduction to the wished-for discourse he asked for a draught of milk, for which he paid her liberally; and he inquired, "Does not that house belong to Sir Joseph Steward?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply; "and a strange old gentleman he is."

"In what way?" asked Christian.

"Oh! he lives such a queer sort of life when he is at home," responded the milk-woman; "and dresses in such an odd fashion that the little boys in the neighbourhood all laugh at him: and then he tries to run after them to beat them with his cane—but he never can catch them because of the gout in his feet."

"Is he married?" inquired Christian.

"No, sir," answered the woman: and then with a meaning look, she added, "But I'm sure he ought to be; for there isn't a decent girl in all these parts will go into his service."

"You mean to say," observed Christian, trembling on the beautiful Laura's behalf at what he thus heard, "that Sir Joseph Steward is not very correct in his conduct?"

"Correct? No, sir!" exclaimed the woman. "My sister was fool enough to let her daughter take a situation at Verner House—that's the name of his place—but she was a good girl, and so no harm came of it: but it was for no want of trying on Sir Joseph's part if she didn't meet her ruin there. He is very rich, but does no good with his money: he is a bad landlord and a bad master; and I shouldn't mind telling him so to his face. Ah! sir, old as he is, and with one foot in the grave, I can tell you that he has brought sorrow into many a humble home in these parts: for if he don't use his riches to do good, he is lavish enough of his gold when it is to do harm. You understand me, sir?"

"I do—unfortunately I do," rejoined Christian, his thoughts painfully associating themselves with the beautiful Laura; and when he remembered that she had an air of artless innocence strongly contrasting with the fierce commanding and imperious demeanour of Mrs. Oxenden, he felt his blood boiling with indignation at the bare suspicion of what might be in store for that defenceless being.

"Yes, sir," continued the milk-woman, "there are many people about here who could tell a tale but little creditable to Sir Joseph Steward; and my only surprise is that he hasn't had his brains beat out long ago by some indignant husband, father, or brother. But money is such a power! —and if it does much mischief, it can also help to hush it up. Would you believe it—Sir Joseph is a magistrate; and that gives him an opportunity of terrifying the poor wretches whom he has first injured."

"Do you happen to know the name of Oxenden?" inquired our hero.

"No, sir," answered the woman. "But I must be going—for I am already later than usual."

Christian could not detain her any longer; and he had heard enough to deepen all the compassion he had previously felt on behalf of the beautiful Laura, as well as to fill him with the most serious apprehensions that some dark plot was in contemplation against that defenceless being's peace of mind. But how could he assist her?—and this was the question which he kept asking himself during the remainder of his walk back into Ramsgate.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE FINALE OF THE SYCAMORE EPISODE.

In the meantime what had been passing at the Royal Hotel in that town? At about a quarter past six o'clock two young gentlemen were introduced by the waiter to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room; and that individual received them with every appearance of the warmest friendship. One was barely twenty-two—the other a few months younger still: both on coming of age had inherited fortunes—both were inexperienced, giddy, gay, and extravagant—anxious to be considered very fine dashing fellows, and never pausing to reflect at what high price they were purchasing this reputation. There was no kinship between them: but they had been to college together, and their intimacy was renewed when launching themselves upon the great sea of life. They considered Mr. Sycamore to be the very pink of everything that was most admirable, fascinating, and worthy of imitation as a man of fashion; and they were as proud of having obtained his friendship as if they were associating with the highest aristocrat in the land.

Such were the two young gentlemen whom Mr. Sycamore had invited to dinner; and on their being introduced, he ordered the waiter to have the banquet served up at once. The command was promptly obeyed; and Mr. Sycamore sat down to table with his guests. The courses of soup and fish passed off agreeably enough; and Sycamore felt his spirits revive as he perceived that the young gentlemen were in an excellent humour to do justice to the wine. With the third course the champagne was introduced; and after the first glass the young gentlemen began to grow very talkative, and likewise to show off their airs.

"Well, you speak of fine women down here, Sycamore," said one, running his fingers in an affected manner through his perfumed hair; "but I vow and declare I have not seen any to my taste."

"What! not at bathing time?" asked Mr. Sycamore with a knowing look. "Why, my dear fellow, I saw you on the sands for three hours yesterday, nearly all the while the tide served; and you never once had your glass down from your eye."

"'Pon my soul, that's too bad, Sycamore!" said the young gentleman, infinitely delighted at this flattering compliment to his rakish propensities. "I must confess I saw more of Lady Harriet's bust than she usually displays when in evening costume——and yet you know she *does* dress devilish low."

"Ah!" cried Sycamore, "I always thought there was something between you and Lady Harriet—especially as her husband neglects her."

"Come, come, Sycamore—don't be scandalous!" said the young gentleman, laughing immensely. "Suppose I did dance five times running with Lady Harriet the other evening—and suppose I did sit next to her at supper—and suppose I did ride out on horseback with her next day——why, what then? People of course can draw their own inferences: but I say nothing."

"You are two young rakes," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore, pumping up the merriest laugh he could possibly force by that artificial process; "and I shall really lose my character if I am seen in your company: I shall be set down as bad as yourselves. Come, fill—and pass the champagne."

"It's all this fellow here who leads me into mischief," continued the same young gentleman who had previously been speaking, and who now alluded to his companion, who was just a few months older than himself. "I should like to know how he gets on with that pretty little widow with the sweet blue eyes?"

"Oh, if you think I mean matrimony," drawled out the young gentleman thus alluded to, at the same time giving an affected laugh, "you are most gloriously mistaken—and the little widow knows it. Mind, I do not say that she is of a larking disposition: but suppose she is—and that she takes a fancy to me—and suppose that she has no objection to a little amour upon the sly,—well, is she the worse? or am I the worse? Just answer me that."

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Mr. Sycamore. "But of course we now know what it all means, and on what terms the pretty little widow and you stand together."

We may as well observe for the information of the reader, that the Lady Harriet and the pretty little widow thus spoken of, were two as virtuous ladies as any in the whole world—and that by no levity, much less impropriety on their parts, had they ever afforded the slightest ground for these diabolically impertinent modes in which their names were mentioned. It is too often the case that the characters of well-principled women are nodded, and winked, and hinted away as a sacrifice to the miserable vanity of profligate coxcombs, who flatter themselves that it is very fine indeed and "quite the thing" to have such little *liaisons* on hand. Sycamore, as a man of the world, knew perfectly well that it was nothing but mere vaunt and braggadocio on the part of his guests: but he encouraged it—he pretended to believe in it—he ministered to their wretched vanity—and he concluded by telling them that they were two desperate fellows, and that if he had a wife or sisters he would sooner shut them up in convents than allow such irresistibles to approach them. All this elevated the two shallow-brained young gentlemen into perfect ecstacies; and they began talking more largely still, but in somewhat another strain.

"For my part," said he who was barely twenty-two, "I am getting tired of England—I think I shall go abroad. I have seen so much of life, I am pretty near worn out."

"Well, it's just the case with me," observed the other young gentleman; "there's no enjoyment in pleasure now. When one has had the finest women in England at his command, and revelled so in wine that he can stand anything and has not even the luxury of getting gloriously drunk, "This young gentleman," Mrs. Oxenden hastened to observe, "is not one of our party: he is a stranger—and he came forward most kindly to render us his assistance."

"Oh, very good!" said the old man with an air of relief: and then he again turned his eyes upon the young lady, who became pale as death and seemed as if she were about to faint.

"We thank you most sincerely, sir," said Mrs. Oxenden, turning towards our hero, but with a certain impatience in her air, as if she felt him to be one too many upon the spot and wished him
be gone.

He dared not remain any longer—he h
excuse: he accordingly raised his hat; a
turning away when he perceived that t
lady gave a half-start as if she would
towards him for protection.

"Laura, do not be foolish!" said
in an under-tone, but with rapid
utterance: and she caught the
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almost menacing significan
dark eyes. "This is Sir J

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be most ominously like
a cold apprehension to the
individual's heart.
"Don't suffer yourself to be intruded upon
exclaimed one of the young gentlemen.
"Say that Mr. Sycamore is not within?" cried
other, in an authoritative tone to the
waiter.

"And if they don't go, pitch them down the
stairs," added the first.

"Or toss them out of the window," superadded the second.

"What shall I say, sir?" asked the waiter, who himself looked somewhat embarrassed, as if he had a vague suspicion of impending evil floating in his mind—although he most probably considered Messrs. Smith and Noakes to be sheriffs'-officers, and therefore to have no mission more serious than that of the execution of civil process.

"Are they *really* gentlemen?" inquired Sycamore, who now felt as if boiling oil were pouring through his veins.

"Well, sir, they told me to say they was," answered the waiter: but he did not think it necessary to state in addition the trifling fact that a half-crown had been thrust into his hand as a bribe for the representation of the gentility of Messrs. Smith and Noakes.

"I think I had better see them," said Mr. Sycamore, whose perturbation—amounting indeed to anguish—was so plainly visible that the waiter fancied he beheld therein the confirmation of his fears, and the two young gentlemen began to exchange suspicious looks. "Where are they?" inquired Sycamore, as the thought suddenly struck him that he would pass into the next room, put on his hat, and decamp as quickly as his legs would carry him.

"They are on the landing, sir," responded the waiter.

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of his thoughts, to comprehend that the
individuals who sought him were evidently
posed to conduct their proceedings in as delicate
way as possible; and whatever might happen, he
himself had no inclination to excite the scandal of
exposure.

"Tell them I will come immediately," he said: and he filled a bumper of champagne in the hope of giving himself courage and deadening the frightful horror of his thoughts: but the wine, which a few minutes back had flowed like nectar down his throat, now appeared to remain there as if against the impediment of the feelings which well nigh suffocated him.

"What the deuce does it all mean, Sycamore?" asked one of the young gentlemen, the instant the waiter had left the room. "Is it a case of tapping on the shoulder? If so, make use of me—I'm your man for a few hundreds."

"And I also!" exclaimed the other young gentleman. "Always stick by your friend—and never say die till you're dead. That's my motto."

It was with a ghastly look that Sycamore endeavoured to say something with a laugh of forced cheerfulness: but horribly apprehensive that those who awaited him, would lose all patience and come in to seek him if he tarried any longer, he hurried from the room. On the landing he beheld the self-styled Messrs. Smith and Noakes; and one of them said, "Can we have a little talk together in private, Mr. Sycamore?"

"This way, gentlemen," said the miserable wretch in a half-choking voice: and he led them into his sitting-room, which in addition to the door that thus opened upon the landing, had another communicating with the parlour that served as his dining-room.

The two individuals kept very close upon Mr. Sycamore, as they followed him into the room and after they had entered it; and the one who acted as spokesman, said with a significant look, "You will give us credit, sir, for having discharged this unpleasant little duty in as delicate a way as possible. My name isn't Smith—nor is my partner's name Noakes. Allow us to introduce ourselves as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, and Mr. William Withers, both very much at your service."

"Not too loud—not too loud!" gasped Sycamore, indicating the door of communication between the two rooms. "Who are you, gentlemen?" he faltered forth. "Is it—is it—debt?" and the unhappy man would have given worlds at that moment to be told that he was merely about to be consigned to a debtor's gaol; but a secret voice whispered in his soul that it was *not* for debt.

"Well sir, we are officers, it is true," replied Mr. Shadbolt, who thought it necessary to break the matter as delicately as possible, inasmuch as he entertained the hope that the reward would be commensurate with the amount of his kind consideration: "but we are not exactly sheriffs'-officers

gh my friend Withers was a few years back,
't mistake. You was a bum-bailiff once,
wasn't you?"

that to you?" growled the sulky gen-
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ntinued Mr. Shadbolt, "that
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mself which shouldn't say it. Gay
gentlemen like you, sir, will get into
nd with such brilliant examples as Dr.
nd Mr. Fauntleroy before your eyes, for-
must be looked upon as one of the genteel
e frailties of which human natur' is susceptible
n this sublunary spear."

Having thus wound up his truly beautiful and highly edifying speech—wherein by an ingenious implication he conveyed to the prisoner the precise charge for which he was captured—Mr. Shadbolt took a pinch of snuff, and affected to be a long time in partaking of that refreshment—which was another piece of delicate consideration on his part, the purpose being to afford Mr. Sycamore leisure to compose his feelings.

"Am I to go with you?" asked the wretched man, his countenance white as a sheet and his whole form trembling nervously.

"In course you be," growled Mr. Withers, who seemed offended at the bare idea of the necessity for such a proceeding being doubted.

"Hold your tongue, Withers," said Mr. Shadbolt. "The fact is, my dear sir, we would cheerfully do without you if we could: it grieves us to disturb you at dinner—but it is impossible to dispense with your society, now that we have had the honour of forming your acquaintance. But no one need know anything about it. And look you here, sir," he added, suddenly lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper, and drawing the prisoner partially aside; "just tip my friend Withers five guineas, and he'll leave those handcuffs that he's got with him, all snug at the bottom of his coat-pocket. Excuse me too for observing that I am not exactly above accepting the same little compliment for myself, as you might possibly suppose I am."

"You will let me keep all I have about me—or all I may get?" said Sycamore,—who, now that the bitterness of his arrest was past, began to recover his self-possession.

"You shall experience just such treatment, sir," answered Mr. Shadbolt, "as we should show our own brother if he got into trouble and we was charged with the business."

Sycamore drew out his purse, and handed five guineas to Mr. Withers, who was thereupon most graciously pleased to suffer his countenance to expand into a more amiable expression than it had hitherto worn; while Mr. Shadbolt, on receiving a similar gratuity, proclaimed his conviction that Mr. Sycamore was a regular gentleman and should be treated as such.

"Will you let me go into the next room for a few moments?" asked Sycamore hastily.

"Not if so be as there's a door on t'other side," responded Mr. Withers.

"There is not," answered Sycamore: "there is this door, and there is the one upon the landing——"

"But what do you want?" asked Wither sulkily.

"Never do you mind what the gentleman wants," said Shadbolt. "Wait an instant, sir."

Thereupon he skipped towards the door of communication in order to peep through the key-hole and ascertain whether there was a door or not at the further extremity of the adjoining room. But as he popped his head suddenly down, he caught the twinkling of an eye on the other side of the key-hole: then that eye was abruptly withdrawn—he could see into the next room—and he beheld a young gentleman rapidly retreating towards another young gentleman who sate at the table.

"Your friends have twigged you, sir, I am sorry to say," observed Mr. Shadbolt, turning away from the door and addressing himself to the prisoner. "They have been listening, sir; for I saw an eye—and where an eye can peep an ear can plant itself."

Mr. Sycamore gave utterance to an oath expressive of his bitter vexation and disappointment. The fact is, he had intended to take advantage of the generous offers just now made by the two young gentlemen. The forged bill for which he was arrested, was for five hundred pounds; and he had purposed to represent to those young gentlemen that he was in the custody of sheriffs'-officers for a debt to a similar amount—so that if he could manage to obtain that sum from them he would have a chance of hushing up the affair immediately on his arrival in London with the detectives. But this hope was now completely overthrown; and scarcely had Mr. Shadbolt announced to him that "his friends had twigged him," when he heard the bell down stairs ringing violently. It was the bell of the adjoining room; and the waiter was not very long in answering it, inasmuch as he had been nearly all the time upon the landing, with his own ear applied to the key-hole of the sitting-room where the above described scene with the officers had taken place.

"Our hats, waiter, immediately! our hats!" the two young gentlemen in the adjacent apartment were now heard to ejaculate: and then the words "swindler," "forger," "adventurer," "scoundrel," and other equally pleasing appellations were likewise wafted to the wretched Sycamore's ears.

"Good heaven, what an exposure!" moaned the wretched man, turning away towards the window.

The waiter entered to fetch the two young gentlemen's hats, which had been left in the sitting-room; and he relieved his own feelings by sparring for a moment like clock-work behind Mr. Sycamore's back, at the same time making signs to the two officers—as much as to imply that he knew it all, and that as he was now convinced he should never get a penny piece from Mr. Sycamore for waiting on him, he should very much like to inflict summary chastisement upon the scoundrel. Having performed this pantomime, he said gruffly, "Did you speak, sir?"

"Who? I? No!" ejaculated Sycamore, startled from his wretched reverie and turning abruptly round.

"Then you had ought to," returned the waiter:

and raising his voice to a higher key, he exclaimed, "You had ought to say what business you have—a swindling scoundrel like you—coming to a respectable hotel, giving your orders like a prince, robbing everybody, and not so much as paying the poor devils of servants which has run their legs off to wait upon you. A precious nice thing to get into the local papers amongst the Fashionable Intelligence:—'*The Hon. Talbot Sycamore removed on Wednesday last from the Royal Hotel at Ramsgate to his town house of Newgate.*' Dash my wig, such an Honourable!"—and the waiter in order to vent his indignant feelings upon something, dashed his white napkin frantically down upon the unoffending carpet.

Comforted by this procedure, he took up the two young gentlemen's hats, and stalked out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

"Let's go at once," said Sycamore; "or the whole hotel will be up in arms."

"I think you have a servant, sir?" said Mr. Shadbolt.

"Perdition take the servant!" rejoined Sycamore sharply. "Let him shift for himself."

The waiter was holding forth to the two young gentlemen in the adjacent apartment, on the impropriety of scoundrels in general and Mr. Sycamore in particular, taking up their quarters at first-rate hotels,—so that the culprit was enabled to slip out of the establishment, closely accompanied however by the two detectives. In the street they met the dapper groom; and he at once comprehended that something was the matter. It was impossible to avoid giving him a suitable explanation: whereupon he darted away, —thinking perhaps that it was impolitic for him to re-enter the hotel, as he might stand a chance of being given into custody as an aider and abettor of his master in the process of swindling which had been carried on. Neither did he deem it expedient to accompany his master to London; and thus he did indeed fulfil Mr. Sycamore's recommendation—that he should shift for himself.

Barely five minutes had elapsed after Sycamore's departure with the two detectives—and while the waiter was acquainting the barmaid and all the other domestics with the details of the explosion that had just occurred—when a telegraphic despatch was hurriedly brought into the hotel from the railway station. It contained simply these words:—"Give Sycamore and the groom into custody. Leave Mr. Ashton unmolested: he is innocent. I shall be down by the next train."

This was from the landlord of the hotel, who had gone up to London, where he had instituted inquiries with such rapidity and effect, as to be enabled to arrive at the conclusions contained in that telegraphic despatch. It was however too late to act upon it—for the hand of justice had already laid its grasp upon one of the scoundrels, and the other had decamped.

Christian Ashton entered the hotel at this conjuncture. He was speedily made acquainted with what had occurred; and the telegraphic despatch was shown to him. He was infinitely delighted thus to discover that his own reputation remained perfectly undamaged; and he proceeded to explain the circumstances under which he had withdrawn himself in the forenoon from Mr. Sycamore's employment, and how he had overheard at the tavern the intention on the part of Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers to arrest that individual. The bar-maid now understood wherefore our young hero had asked for his bill separately from Sycamore's account; and this circumstance, together with the promptitude exhibited by Christian in settling it, confirmed the favourable intimation forwarded by the landlord from London.

CHAPTER LXIV.

VERNER HOUSE.

When he had retired to his own chamber at night, after the exciting events of the stirring day through which he had passed, Christian Ashton reflected upon all those occurrences—and not the least on the mysterious adventure of which he had obtained an initiative glimpse in the neighbourhood of Sir John Steward's residence. As the reader is aware, our young hero's heart was engaged with an unalterable devotion to the charming Isabella Vincent; and therefore it was merely with a genuine compassion and a pure sympathy that he thought of the beauteous and afflicted Laura. He trembled on her behalf for more reasons than one: the character he had heard of Sir John Steward, and which seemed fully justified by the old libertine's gloating looks, was alone sufficient to fill him with such apprehensions: but in addition thereto, he by no means liked the appearance of Mrs. Oxenden. That she was exceedingly handsome, we have already said: but she had a certain bold and resolute look, fully indicating the firmness and perseverance with which she would prosecute any enterprise, even though a bad one. She had the thickly pencilled ebon brows and the fiery eyes which denote strong passions: the configuration of her countenance was essentially voluptuous. She was not a woman to inspire love by her beauty—only to excite passion: nor did she herself appear susceptible of the former in its chastest and purest sense—though on the other hand, she seemed fully capable of experiencing the latter with a glowing and devouring ardour. Between that old man of libertine character, and this woman of sternest purpose, the hapless Laura appeared in the eyes of Christian to be as helpless as a lamb between two wolves bent on its destruction.

The reader may have already gleaned a sufficiency of our hero's character, to be aware that it was marked by chivalrous magnanimity. His experiences of life were wondrously enlarged since we first beheld him seated with his amiable sister in the lodging at Mrs. Macauley's house in London. He had seen enough of the villanies of the world to fill him with a generous longing to baffle and frustrate them whensoever the opportunity should present itself; and apart from his own naturally noble impulses, he had not failed to profit by the example of Mr. Redcliffe. It is not therefore astonishing if Christian lay awake a considerable time, pondering all he had seen in the close vicinage of Verner House—and that he should also rack his brain for the means of affording Laura that assistance which he felt convinced she required. But sleep came over him ere his mind was settled to any positive course; and when he awoke in the morning, he had to begin his meditations on that point all over again. He was equally uncertain how to act in respect to his own personal concerns—whether he should leave the hotel and take a cheap lodging, so that he might remain in Ramsgate for a few days in the hope that events might occur to render him useful to Laura—or whether he should remain at the hotel until the morrow and see what that day might bring forth. His doubts in this respect were however set at rest when he descended from his chamber: for the landlord requested him to step into his parlour—where he addressed him in the following manner:—

"I returned home too late last night, Mr. Ashton, to be enabled to have a word with you. You are aware of the mention I felt it my duty to make of you in the telegraphic despatch. As you may easily suppose, my first inquiry on reaching London yesterday afternoon, was at the banker's where the villain Sycamore pretended to have a considerable sum of money; and I need hardly tell you that his representations were entirely false. I thence proceeded to the hotel in Piccadilly; and there I learnt that the statement you had made me in respect to the mode of your introduction to Sycamore, and the short period of your acquaintance, was strictly correct. In short, I know you to be an honourable young gentleman; and I am even sorry that you should have thought it necessary to liquidate your own account at my hotel, inasmuch as it was incurred under the impression that it would be paid by your employer. I will not insult you by offering to return the money: but I beg that you will do me the favour to remain here as my guest for as long as it may suit you to stay in Ramsgate. Is there any necessity for your speedy departure?"

"On the contrary," replied Christian, "it suits me well enough to remain here for a few days; and as your proposal is so generously made, in the same friendly spirit do I accept it."

"Use the coffee room, therefore," said the landlord, "just as if it were your own; and I will take care that every attention shall be shown you. As for that villain Sycamore, he will be punished—and this is a source of satisfaction. Fortunately his boxes contain the greater portion of the goods which he obtained from the tradesmen in this town; and they shall all be returned to them."

"But your loss is a severe one?" remarked Christian.

The landlord shrugged his shoulders, and said "It is one of the risks which we must run in business."

Here the conversation ended; and our young hero proceeded to the coffee-room, where an excellent breakfast was served up to him,—the waiters displaying as much attention as if he were the best customer they ever had. There were several other gentlemen partaking of their morning meal at the time: but one especially attracted Christian's notice. He was about three-and-twenty years of age—tall, well made—and without being positively handsome, had a good-looking countenance characterised by manly frankness. He however seemed unhappy—or at least troubled in his mind—as might be discerned by the pensiveness of his air, which was however interrupted by occasional slight starts as if he were goaded by some sudden poignancy of feeling. He was handsomely dressed: his appearance was eminently genteel; and when he had occasion to address the waiter, it was with the well-bred air of the polished gentleman. Christian had not seen him at the hotel before this occasion; and he presently learnt, from some observation which he made to the waiter, that he had only arrived late on the previous evening.

After breakfast, Christian strolled out; and he soon found himself bending his way in the direction of Verner House,—which, as already stated, was about three miles distant from Ramsgate. He traversed the fields—he came in sight of the mansion—and then he stopped short, mentally ejaculating, "But what on earth can I do to assist this poor young lady?"

He knew very well that if he were seen lurking about the premises, suspicion would be excited; for his conduct on the preceding evening had more or less angered Mrs. Oxenden. If therefore it were imagined inside the dwelling that he entertained the purpose of assisting Laura in whatsoever way she might require a friendly succour, it would only have the effect of increasing the precautions doubtless already taken to keep her in safe custody. At least, so thought our hero: for he had made up his mind that she *was* under terrorism and coercion of some sort—an opinion which was natural enough after all he had seen on the previous day.

Having reflected for some time within himself, Christian determined to inspect the grounds amidst which Verner House was situated, so that if by any accident Laura should be walking out alone within the enclosure, he might address a few words to her and ascertain whether he could in any way serve her or not. At the same time he was careful to conduct this inspection with all suitable caution, so as not to be seen from the windows of the house. To observe such caution was not difficult, inasmuch as the kitchen garden was surrounded by a high wall—the paddock and orchard by palings of an almost equal altitude—and the adjacent meadows by thick hedges. Climbing up into a tree, which completely concealed him, Christian looked over into the grounds in the rear of the dwelling: he beheld extensive stabling premises—a garden well laid out, and having spacious conservatories—several horses in the paddock—and numerous domestics moving about. Thus everything indicated the wealth of Sir John Steward—while the handsome draperies of the windows formed a criterion of the sumptuousness with which the mansion was furnished. An hour passed—and still Christian sate up in the tree, completely concealed by its thick embowering foliage. His time was his own; and he thought he might as well spend it in working out a good purpose.

Presently he beheld Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden issue forth from the mansion and walk slowly across a lawn which separated the kitchen garden from the back part of the premises. They were in deep and earnest discourse together. The old Baronet was clad in precisely the same way as on the previous evening—in his dressing-gown, his cap, and slippers. Mrs. Oxenden wore a white muslin wrapper, fastened up to the throat, and which displayed the fine symmetry of her shape to its fullest advantage. Her raven hair hung in heavy tresses, with a sort of studied negligence, upon her admirably sloping shoulders; and there was something majestic and stately in the carriage of her fine tall form, as well as resolute and determined in the gestures with which she gave impressiveness to her discourse. Christian was too far off to catch a syllable that was said, or even to hear the tones of their voices: but he had a keen power of vision—and this enabled him to discern that their conversation was of an earnest character. That it related to Laura, he had no doubt; and that it boded naught favourable to her happiness, he was equally certain.

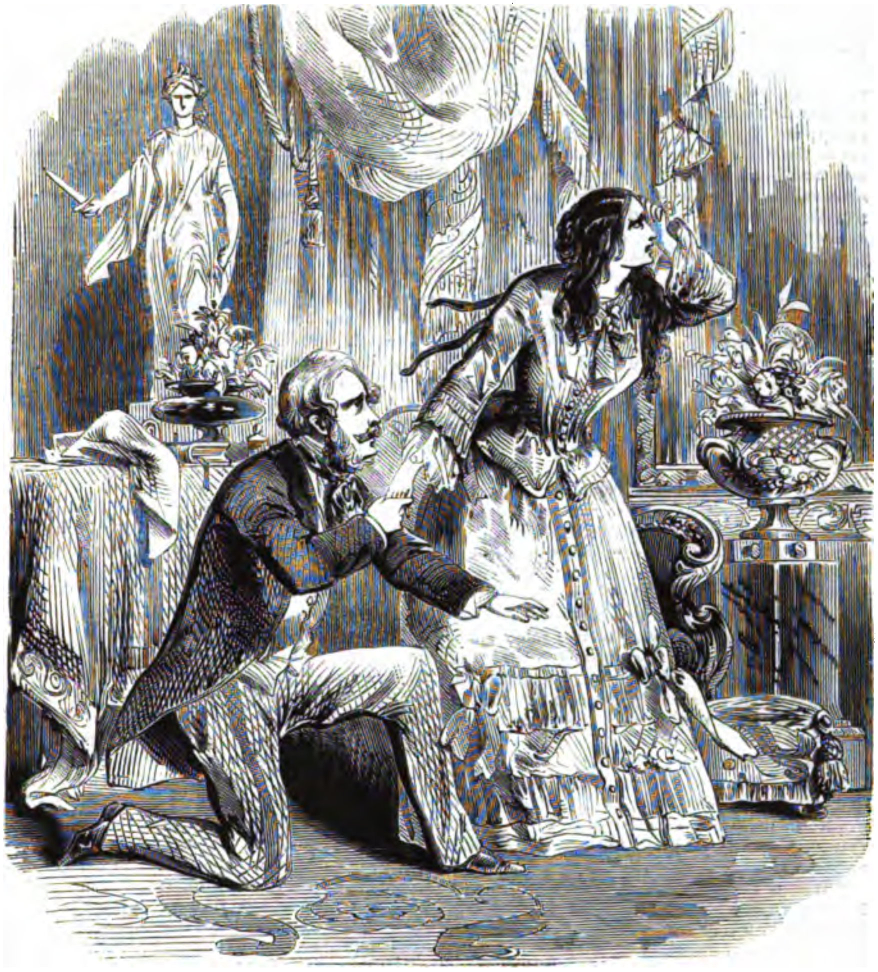
For upwards of half-an-hour did the old Baronet and Mrs. Oxenden walk to and fro upon the lawn, thus discoursing. At the expiration of that interval the lady left the old man, and re-entered the dwelling. Sir John remained in the garden; and every now and then he rubbed his hands together, as if with a gloating satisfaction at some idea that was uppermost in his mind. In about twenty minutes two females issued from the mansion: one was immediately recognised by Christian to be the beautiful Laura—the other was a horrible-looking negress with great thick lips and a most repulsive aspect. The young lady was apparelled in a morning dress; but she had on her bonnet, as if she were going for a walk. This however might merely be on account of the heat of the sun: for it was now past noon, and its beams poured down with sultry strength. The instant she caught a glimpse of Sir John Steward, she shrank back; but the horrible-looking negress seized her roughly by the arm, and appeared to address her in threatening language. Such was our hero's indignation, that he was about to spring down from the tree, scale the garden wall, and bound forward to her assistance,—when he was suddenly struck by the rashness and folly of such a proceeding, inasmuch as he would be placing himself in a false position by an illegal trespass upon the Baronet's grounds. It was however difficult for him to exercise a sufficient degree of patience to keep him there as a mere beholder, in the midst of the dense foliage of that tree.

The negress, we have said, caught the young lady by the arm, and appeared to use threatening language towards her—whereat she seemed smitten with dismay; and she suffered the black woman to lead her along towards the Baronet, who was approaching across the grass-plat with his shuffling, shambling gait. He said something to her: Laura averted her countenance as if in mingled anguish and aversion—Sir John went on speaking—she slowly turned her eyes upon him again—she listened with a deepening attention—and then Christian saw the old man take her hand and continue his discourse. That hand of her's lingered in his: she appeared to listen with a deepening interest—but Christian was too far off to discern the precise expression of her countenance; though he thought that it indicated a painful seriousness. Slowly did Sir John Steward insinuate an arm round Laura's waist: for a few moments she did not appear to notice it—but as if all in an instant becoming aware that such was the case, she abruptly disengaged herself. Then the negress spoke and gesticulated vehemently—the Baronet made her a sign to be quiet—and he seemed to go on addressing Laura in a coaxing, cajoling strain. This much Christian judged from his gestures: but whether it were so or not, Laura suddenly interrupted him by clasping her hands and saying something with an air of the most touching appeal. The Baronet gave a brief response, and turned aside in one direction—while Laura and the negress, withdrawing in the other, re-entered the mansion.

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Oxenden came forth and rejoined Sir John Steward. They had not been together many moments, when a footman in handsome livery accosted them and delivered some message. He withdrew—but shortly re-appeared, conducting a gentleman dressed in deep black, and who had the appearance of a clergyman—or, as a second thought suggested to Christian, of a Catholic priest, by certain peculiarities in his apparel. The footman retired; and the visitor in black remained for about ten minutes in conversation with Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden. They then all three slowly entered the mansion together; and as another half-hour passed without the re-appearance of any of those whose proceedings Christian had been watching, he descended from the tree.

It was now two o'clock in the afternoon—and he knew not whether to retrace his way to Ramsgate, or to linger in that neighbourhood with the chance of seeing anything more that might throw the faintest light on what was going on within the precincts of Verner House. He was however fearful of being detected in that vicinage—in which case his presence might possibly do more harm than good to Laura's interests. He had less misgiving in respect to the intentions harboured towards her than he had previously entertained: that is to say, he no longer thought it was for an outrageously vile purpose that she had been brought thither, but that matrimonial views were entertained—or else why the presence of that gentleman in black, who was evidently a minister of religion of some denomination or another? He began to retrace his way towards the town, partially with the idea of acquainting the landlord of the hotel with all he had seen, and asking his advice and assistance; yet his mind was not altogether made up to the adoption of this step, inasmuch as he naturally reflected that the landlord had quite enough to do in attending to his own business without attending to that of others, and that he might moreover be reluctant to perform a hostile part towards a man of wealth and influence in the neighbourhood. For an instant Christian thought of boldly addressing himself to a magistrate: but it required only another moment's thought to make him aware that there was not sufficient ground for legal interference in any shape or way. In a word, our young hero could settle his mind to no decisive course of action; and yet he was determined not to abandon the enterprise in which he had embarked.

He entered Ramsgate: and as he was proceeding towards the hotel, he beheld a group of mountebanks exhibiting their antics in the market-place. Three or four, apparelled in a quaint costume, were mounted on high stilts—while a companion in plain clothes was beating a huge drum and running his lips rapidly along a set of pandean pipes conveniently thrust into his



buttoned-up waistcoat. This individual's head was thrown back in the most approved style adopted by those *artistes* who exercise their powers of harmony on that humble and unpretending instrument. Furiously did he beat the drum, and with most exemplary perseverance did he blow away at the mouth-organ. Christian was about to pass the group, when something peculiar in the appearance of the gentleman who played the drum and pandean pipes induced him to glance a second time towards that individual. And now Christian stopped short in perfect amazement, when he recognized in the mountebank-musician no less a personage than his lordship Baron Raggidbak, late Groom of the Stole to that illustrious Prince his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha!

Yes—there was his lordship beyond all possibility of doubt. Tall, lean, and lank—more hungry-looking than ever—bearded and moustached—and clad in a shabby suit that seemed to have been originally made for a person at least a foot shorter,—the ex-Groom of the Stole to the illustrious German Prince was beating away at the drum and running his mouth rapidly along the pandean pipes, as already described. What a vicissitude! what a fall had this great man experienced! Christian looked amongst the mountebanks, thinking it by no means improbable he might see the Grand Duke himself performing his antics on the summit of a pair of stilts, or standing on his head, or twirling a basin upon the top of a stick, or accomplishing any other feat of gymnastics or jugglery. But for the honour of the German petty sovereigns (if those mean trumpery fellows have any honour worth caring for) his Royal Highness of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was not in the mountebank category. Christian did not think it worth while to be recognised by Baron Raggidbak; and therefore when he had a trifle recovered from his amazement, he was moving away. But the stilted mountebank who was especially charged with the duty of collecting the coin with which the public generosity was wont to recompense the authors of these splendid entertainments, had his eye upon Christian from the very first moment that he had halted near the group; and the fellow had at once singled him out as the likeliest spectator to drop a silver coin into the basin. He therefore strode after him in some such a manner as that which the fairy tale represents the ogre with the seven-league boots as adopting; and stooping down—apparently at the imminent risk of falling head foremost and breaking his neck—the mountebank balanced himself on one stilt and presented the basin. Christian dropped a shilling into it—whereat the mountebank was seized with such a violent ecstasy of delight that he whirled himself round on the one stilt, the other being stretched out behind him in a horizontal direction and skimming over the hats, caps, and bonnets of the spectators who happened to come within the range of this peculiar feat.

"You are a perfect gentleman, sir," said the mountebank, when his achievement was finished; and he bowed low to Christian as he thus spoke.

"If you think so," said our hero with a smile; "you may perhaps answer me a question or two—and I will drop another coin into your basin."

"As many answers as you like, sir," joyously responded the mountebank, "at that rate:"—and he bent more forward to hear what Christian had to say—placing his hands upon his knees, assuming a sort of squatting position in the air, but dodging the while to and fro or from side to side with little short steps of his stilts, so as to maintain his balance: for it requires but a very limited knowledge of the laws of equilibrium and gravitation to convince any one of our readers that a gentleman thus perched upon high stilts cannot very conveniently stand perfectly still for three moments at a time.

"Who is that person that plays your drum?" inquired Christian. "Never mind why I ask—and don't look round at him, as I do not wish him to see that I am speaking of him."

"He is a poor German devil that we picked up a few months back," replied the mountebank; "and it so happened that we wanted a person to play the drum and the organ——"

"The organ?" said Christian, inquiringly.

"Yes—the mouth-organ, to be sure!—and where is there a nobler instrument?" said the mountebank, with a transient air of indignation: but apparently recollecting that another shilling was at stake, he instantaneously recovered his good humour—and having cut a caper to relieve his feelings, he again bent down to Christian. "Yes," he continued, "we picked up that poor devil some months ago, and as our pardner which used to beat the drum and play the organ, had gone into a little temporary retirement—only six months at the mill, for mistaking another gentleman's pocket for his own during the bitter cold weather of March last, when a man was of course glad to put his hand anywheres to keep it warm——"

"Well, well," interrupted Christian; "you took this German to supply his place?"

"Exactly so, sir; and in all my life I never did see such a feller to eat whatever comes in his way, and to get blazing drunk whenever he has the opportunity. You should hear him in his cups—what gammon he talks about Grand Dukes and Grooms of the Stole, and so on; and he says too that he has been a Baron and was called 'my lord,' that he has dined with our Queen and sat hob-and-nob with Prince Halbert. Of course it's all lies——"

"And what name does he bear?" asked Christian, who did not think it worth while to inform the mountebank that so far from its being all false, it was perfectly consistent with truth.

"Name?" ejaculated the mountebank contemptuously: "you never heard such a name as he gave himself—but it was an uncommon true one, I can tell you, sir, when he came amongst us. What do you think of Raggidbak as a name to go to bed with?"

"A very strange one indeed," answered Christian: and having dropped the promised extra shilling into the basin, he hurried away; for he saw that Baron Raggidbak was looking towards him over the top of the mouth-organ. On regaining his hotel, our hero made some little alterations in his toilet, and at about five o'clock descended to the coffee-room to give orders in respect to his dinner. At the moment he entered the only person who was there was that tall handsome young gentleman of about three-and-twenty, whom he had seen at breakfast in the morning, and whose appearance had so much interested him. This individual was sitting at a table, on which his elbows rested, and his face was buried in his hands: he was evidently absorbed in the deepest thought—and Christian, judging from the melancholy air which he had observed in the morning, fancied that it was a reverie of no very pleasing nature. Our young hero sate down and took up a newspaper—when all of a sudden the interesting stranger at the other table smote his clenched fist upon the board, giving unconscious utterance to some ejaculation expressive of the agitated condition of his mind. It was evident that he had not noticed Christian's presence—or else that his mind was so completely abstracted he would have done the same if a dozen persons had been in the room. Suddenly perceiving our hero, his countenance became crimson—he felt deeply ashamed of himself—and he began to falter forth an apology for his singular behaviour.

"Pray do not consider any excuse necessary," interrupted Christian, with so much gentle kindness of manner that he at once made a favourable impression upon the stranger. "I truly regret," added our hero, "that you should have so much cause for affliction."

The stranger gave no immediate response—but surveyed Christian with the air of one who sought to ascertain whether he would make a friend who might merit his confidence, and who would accept it with a kind and sympathising feeling: for his mind was no doubt in that state when such friendship would prove most truly welcome.

Christian comprehended what was thus passing in his thoughts; but he feared to be obtrusive, and therefore said nothing. By his looks however he seemed to invoke that confidence which the afflicted stranger was evidently anxious to impart.

There was something so frankly ingenuous in Ashton's countenance—something so nobly magnanimous in the expression of his fine dark eyes—that it was no wonder if the stranger should be thus attracted towards him. Every moment during which the silence lasted, the barriers of ceremony and cold formality appeared to be melting away; and at length the stranger said, "You have spoken kindly, sir: you will pardon me for intimating that I have a secret longing to know more of you."

"I will frankly confess," answered Christian, "that I have felt an interest in you: for though older than I by some three or four years, you are nevertheless too young to experience the heavy hand of affliction without exciting sympathy."

The stranger at once grasped our hero's hand,—announcing his name to be Edgar Beverley. Christian mentioned his own name; and with characteristic frankness went on to explain that he himself had known his sorrows, together with a twin-sister whom he dearly loved—but that after a temporary experience of the world's bitterness, fortune had so far smiled on them both as to place them in comparatively happy positions. Our hero furthermore intimated that he had been private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont and to the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quetha, as well as to the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles, whose murder was wrapped up in such profound mystery; and he concluded by giving Edgar Beverley a rapid outline of his adventures with Mr. Sycamore.

"Thank you, my new friend—for such you must permit me to call you—for your confidence," said Beverley: then after a pause, he added, "I likewise have a tale to tell—and I am yearning to unfold it to your ears: but not in this room where at any moment we may be intruded on by other guests at the hotel. We will have a private apartment and dine together."

Christian agreed: the bell was rung—the requirement was mentioned to the waiter, who at once led the way to a private sitting room. Dinner was ordered; and Edgar Beverley went on conversing on general topics: it was evident that he reserved his own history until after the repast, when they might sit together without being continuously interrupted by the entrance of the waiter. Christian found him to be a young man of cultivated intellect,—able to discourse on an infinite variety of topics—the lighter ones without descending to frivolity, the more serious ones without merging into levity or dogmatism. He gathered however from his discourse that he was a lieutenant in the army—that his regiment was stationed at Brighton—but that he was on leave of absence. The more our hero saw of him, the better he was pleased with his unaffected urbanity, his mild gentlemanly manners, and the generosity of the sentiments he uttered on those topics which were calculated to evolve the best traits of the disposition. But there was likewise a manliness of spirit—a suitable pride and a becoming dignity, in Edgar Beverley's character: so that it was evident he was a young man of the loftiest notions of honour and integrity. On the other hand, Christian Ashton himself proved equally agreeable to the lieutenant, and proportionately progressed in his new friend's favourable opinion.

Dinner was served up: it was somewhat hurriedly disposed of—for Lieutenant Beverley was evidently as anxious to commence his narrative as Christian Ashton was to hear it. The dessert was placed on the table; and when the waiter had withdrawn for good, the serious topic of the evening was entered upon.

CHAPTER LV.

EDGAR BEVERLEY.

"In what I am about to relate," began Edgar Beverley, "you will pardon me if I do not particularise names; as you will see by the nature of my history that it involves certain delicate matters; and should the results turn out contrary to my apprehensions—in a word, should the sad misgivings which haunt me prove unfounded, I should naturally regret having specially mentioned the names of individuals with disparagement. The reserve, therefore, which on this point I am about to maintain, must not be regarded as a want of confidence, but only as a proper and honourable precaution."

"Rest assured," answered Christian, "that I shall take this precaution on your part as another proof of those good qualities which I have already learnt to admire in you."

"Thanking you, my new friend, for your favourable opinion," said Beverley, "I will at once enter upon my tale. But it is necessary that I should commence with a few particulars relative to my parentage and my family. My father was the younger brother of a man of wealth and title: he was poor, being totally dependent on his commission as a captain in the same service to which I now belong; and he mortally offended all his relatives by wedding a young lady whose beauty and accomplishments constituted her only dower. Of that union I was the sole issue; and my mother died a few weeks after giving me birth. My father was long inconsolable for her loss—until at length he became sensible of his duty towards me, and reflected that as she had left behind her a pledge of her love, the infant ought now to engross all his care. And he became the fondest of parents to me. He obtained the rank of major a few years after my birth; and though his pay was limited, yet he contrived by the most rigid economy to give me a good education. On reaching the age of twelve, I was sent to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst,—my father bidding me keep it in mind that he had neither money nor interest to procure me a commission, and that I must therefore endeavour to obtain one by the requisite proficiency in my studies. I applied myself thereto with all possible assiduity; and at the age of sixteen I obtained an ensigncy in the ——th regiment of the line. Fortune and misfortune came upon me at the same instant: for on the very day that I read my name in the official gazette as an officer in the Queen's service, my poor father was stricken with paralysis, which in less than a fortnight proved fatal."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of an minute, during which he was visibly struggling against his emotions; and then he resumed his narrative in the following manner:—

"I have stated that my father, in contracting a marriage with a portionless young lady, had offended all his relatives—but none more so than his elder brother, who vowed that he would never speak to him again; and that brother kept his word. But when my father was dead, my uncle appeared somewhat to relent; and he sent an invitation to me to visit him during the few weeks that were to elapse between the funeral and the time appointed for me to join my regiment. Now this uncle of mine was a bachelor—exceedingly rich—with the estates strictly entailed, so that I was his heir presumptive. Of course you understand that if he married and had male issue, I at once ceased to be his heir. But from certain circumstances which I do not choose specially to touch upon, he was not considered to be what is called a marrying man. Perhaps therefore, regarding me as his heir, he wished to unbend towards me—to make himself acquainted with me—and to atone somewhat for his long continued obduracy towards my poor father. Be all this as it may, he sent for me, as I tell you, to his town-mansion at the West End of London; and then, at the age of a little past sixteen, I beheld this uncle of mine for the first time. I could not help it—but I at once conceived towards him a feeling that bordered almost on aversion. Perhaps it was the recollection of his conduct towards my parents—perhaps it was in consequence of certain discreditable rumours which had reached my ears—perhaps it was in a measure connected with his unprepossessing looks: or it may be that all these three reasons entered into that feeling of aversion which I thus experienced. And he on his part conceived an equal antipathy towards me, which speedily manifested itself when he attempted to play the tyrant while affecting to give sound and useful advice. He authoritatively warned me against ever contracting what he denominated such a mad and improper marriage as that which had alienated my father from all his relatives; and when I somewhat indignantly requested my uncle not to asperse the memories of the dead, and to bear in mind that the lady whom he contemptuously spoke of was my own mother, he flew into a passion, ejaculating, 'By heaven, you have inherited all your father's self-will, obstinacy, and perverseness!'—From that day forth I saw that he disliked me: my visit to his residence was abridged; and when I was about to depart to reside elsewhere until the period arrived for joining my regiment, he said, 'I shall allow you one hundred a year for the present; and that in addition to your pay will keep you handsomely. Follow my advice in all things; and I will increase your allowance in proportion as I have proofs of your obedience: but disobey me in any single particular, and I withdraw the allowance altogether.'—I did not choose to irritate him more than I could help: but he doubtless saw by my manner that my spirit rebelled against this harsh and tyrannical treatment. I joined my regiment; and for three years my conduct appeared to give satisfaction to my uncle—for at the expiration of that time he purchased me a lieutenancy in another regiment, and doubled my original allowance: but he invited me no more to visit him."

Here Edgar Beverley again paused: but he shortly resumed his narrative in the following strain:—

"About six months ago a detachment of my regiment was ordered from Manchester, where it had been previously quartered, to Brighton. Not to render my tale longer than is absolutely necessary, I will at once proceed to observe that I had not been many days at Brighton, when one evening at a public ball I was struck with the extraordinary beauty of a young lady whom for the sake of distinction I shall call by the name of Louisa. At the moment my eyes first settled upon her, she was dancing with a gentleman unknown to me; and when the quadrille was finished, he handed her to her seat next to a very old gentleman whom I supposed to be her father. I know not exactly how it was, but on that particular evening I could not obtain any information concerning the young lady: for those who were acquainted with her, did not happen to fall in my way; and two or three whom I asked, had now seen her for the first time—as was the case with myself. Neither could I venture to solicit her hand for a dance, inasmuch as when I applied for the purpose to the Master of the Ceremonies, he at once assured me that it was useless, as to his certain knowledge she was engaged throughout the evening. He was then obliged to flit away to some other part of the room; and thus my curiosity still continued ungratified. It was no wonder that she should thus be engaged so deeply, and that her ivory tablets should be filled with the names of partners for even more dances than she was likely to figure in: for her beauty was of a most captivating nature—and instead of dancing myself, I watched her light sylphid form as it glided gracefully through the mazes of the quadrilles. On returning to my quarters, I could scarcely sleep for the remainder of the night,—so absorbed were my thoughts with the image of the fair one. On the following day, as I was walking in the afternoon along the King's Road, I beheld the young lady approaching from the opposite direction. She was leaning on the arm of that same old gentleman who was with her at the ball on the previous evening; and as I surveyed them both earnestly and attentively, yet without suffering them to perceive that I was thus marked in my gaze, I noticed that the young lady did not hang upon his arm with that sweet familiar confidence which a daughter exhibits towards a parent—but that there was a certain degree of timid reserve and even distant bashfulness or constraint in her demeanour towards him. As they passed, I heard him call her 'Louisa my dear girl;' and she, in answering his observation, addressed him as ——what name shall I use?—we will call him 'Mr. Maxwell;' for you remember that in my narrative I am using fictitious names."

"I bear that fully in mind," observed Christian. "Pray proceed."

"Well," continued Lieutenant Beverley, "I heard the young lady address the old gentleman as Mr. Maxwell; and a chill fell upon my heart—for it instantaneously struck me that he must either be her husband, or else that she was engaged to be married to him: or else, wherefore should he have addressed her so familiarly? I cannot explain to you the cruel feeling with which this thought inspired me. It was not that I was as yet completely infatuated with Louisa: it was rather a sentiment of profound compassion on behalf of a lovely young creature who I felt assured had already been sacrificed, or else was about to be sacrificed, to a man old enough to be her grandfather. I presently turned that I might meet them again: but I did not see them any more that day. At length wandering away from the King's Road, I was walking in another part of Brighton, when in my distracted mood I came in somewhat rude contact against a lady who was just issuing forth from a linen-draper's shop. As a matter of course I lifted my cap and made the sincerest apologies. They were accepted with what appeared to be a degree of familiar courtesy that struck me as strange on the part of the lady whom I thus beheld for the first time. She seemed inclined to keep me in conversation—and yet with an air of so much politeness that it would have amounted to actual rudeness on my part to hurry at once away. Methought that her dark eyes were fixed upon me with a somewhat peculiar expression—a certain degree of languishing boldness, which gradually in my estimation assumed the expression of an overture. Do not think me vain, Mr. Ashton: I never was conceited—much less was I a boaster in respect to the other sex."

"Pray do not think it necessary to give me any such assurance," said Christian. "Doubtless this lady was smitten with your appearance: for if I understand you rightly, you were in your uniform—and the fair sex are ever inclined to be captivated by officers."

"I was in my undress-uniform," responded Edgar Beverley; "and I ought perhaps to have informed you that the lady of whom I am speaking was exceedingly handsome, but some few years older than myself. She was a very fine woman: but the longer I contemplated her, the more did her looks impress me with the conviction that she was not altogether as modestly or as virtuously inclined as she ought to have been. Had I chosen at that instant to have initiated a little affair of gallantry, I might have succeeded: but though I do not mean for an instant to affect that I am more immaculate than other young men upon the point, I certainly had no inclination for an amour at that time, as my thoughts were otherwise engaged. I therefore, after some little conversation, made my bow and walked away. On the following day, between two and three in the afternoon, I was passing along in the neighbourhood of the Pavilion, when I encountered this lady again; and her recognition of me was so pointed that I was compelled to stop and converse with her. She gave me to understand by her looks—as eloquently as looks could speak—that she wished our acquaintance to assume a more intimate footing: but handsome though she were, there was something about her which failed to inspire a feeling sufficient to induce me to avail myself of the opportunity to enter upon an amour. She did not mention who she was; nor at the time was she acquainted with my name. She gave me as much encouragement as a woman possibly could: but I affected not to perceive it. At length I observed that her countenance flushed with a sense of spite and mortification; and with a cold bow she passed on her way. A few minutes afterwards I had ceased to think of her,—all my thoughts being again concentrated on the image of the beautiful Louisa. That same evening I was engaged for a ball given at the house of a wealthy family dwelling at Brighton; and on being introduced to the drawing-room, my eyes speedily singled out that fair creature who was seated next to her aged companion whom we are calling Mr. Maxwell. Now I was resolved to make some inquiries concerning her; and on speaking to the lady of the house, was informed that the old gentleman who sate next to her was her brother-in-law, he having married her elder sister. You cannot imagine the relief which this intelligence imparted to my mind: nor can you conceive how happy I felt when in a few minutes I found myself introduced to Louisa Neville—which is the name by which I must now call her. I was her partner in the first quadrille: I danced with her three or four other sets in the course of that evening: I escorted her to the supper-room,—her old brother-in-law appearing to be pleased rather than otherwise by my attentions towards his wife's beautiful sister. I asked Miss Neville, in the course of the evening, how it happened that Mrs. Maxwell herself was not at the party; and she informed me that her sister had no taste for such gaiety—but that on the other hand Mr. Maxwell himself was exceedingly fond of society. On the following day I met Mr. Maxwell and Louisa out walking: I joined them—and in the course of conversation learnt that Mrs. Maxwell had that day gone to London on a visit to some friends, with whom she purposed to pass four or five weeks. During this interval I saw Mr. Maxwell and his sister-in-law nearly every day, and became more and more enamoured of the beautiful girl. On one occasion I happened to mention my uncle's name,—when it appeared that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were exceedingly well acquainted with him: but it also transpired that Louisa knew him not, and had never seen him. I must here inform you, Mr. Ashton, of something I ought to have mentioned before,—which is, that my uncle does not bear the name of Beverley, he having adopted another name many years ago, by Royal permission, on account of inheriting a certain property from a distant male relative who expressed in his will a desire that this change of name should take place. Thus it was not until I happened specifically to mention the fact of the old Baronet alluded to being my uncle, that Mr. Maxwell became aware of it. You must bear all this in mind, inasmuch as it has something to do with another part of the narrative."

"I shall not forget it," observed Christian. "Pray proceed: for your tale interests me much."

"My acquaintance with the beautiful Louisa and her brother-in-law had lasted about six weeks," continued Beverley, "when the latter, remarking that his wife was to return home from London in the course of that day, invited me to dinner in the evening. I joyfully accepted the engagement. I had not as yet visited Mr. Maxwell's residence: but now I was in hope to obtain a footing there. I had learnt that he was tolerably well off, and that he lived in genteel though by no means splendid style at a house in Kemp Town. Thither at six in the evening did I proceed; and on being ushered to the drawing-room, was cordially welcomed by Mr. Maxwell—who with all the uxorious pride of an old husband possessing a comparatively young and certainly very handsome wife, hastened to present me to the lady herself. Conceive my astonishment, when, as my eyes fell upon her, I recognized the one whom I had twice previously encountered, and whose eloquent looks of passion had so unmistakably conveyed those overtures which I had not thought fit to accept. It was quite evident that Mrs. Maxwell had not previously suspected who the invited guest would prove to be: indeed, as I presently learnt, she had only returned from London just in time to dress for dinner—and I therefore concluded there had been no leisure for much discourse between herself, her husband, and her sister. She started for an instant on beholding me: but both of us recovered our self-possession the next moment—so quickly indeed, that there was nothing in the manner of either sufficiently striking to catch the observation of Mr. Maxwell and Louisa. Mrs. Maxwell received me as a perfect stranger—as one indeed whom she now beheld for the first time; and I of course treated her in a similar manner. Throughout the evening she was only coldly polite towards me; and her behaviour continued formally reserved until the very last—as if she merely tolerated me because her husband had happened to invite me, but that I was by no means a welcome guest. A woman, my dear Mr. Ashton, never forgives the mortifying humiliation to which a rejected overture subjects her; and Mrs. Maxwell was the very last of the sex to be propitiated on such a point. Besides, she saw that my attentions were devoted to her beautiful sister Louisa: and thus, though herself a married woman, she experienced the rage of jealousy after having vainly sought to ensnare me by her own charms. I saw that she exercised the completest empire over her old husband, who was uxorious, submissive, and even servile to a degree—but fond, infatuated, and thus wearing the chains of a willing slavery. Mrs. Maxwell being several years older than her sister, wielded a species of maternal authority over that sister,—who, as their parents had long been dead, naturally looked up to her nearest surviving relative with an almost filial respect. I likewise perceived that Louisa stood much in awe of her; and once or twice submitted to be rebuked, for some trifle or another, without manifesting the least rebellious spirit. I therefore sympathised profoundly with that amiable and beautiful creature who was but too evidently under the dominion of an imperious and tyrannically disposed sister. When I took my leave a little before eleven in the evening, I received no invitation to repeat my visit: for as Mrs. Maxwell gave no such encouragement, her grovelling old husband dared not of his own accord—while delicacy as well as terrorism forbade Louisa from doing that whence her relatives abstained."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for a few minutes, while Christian Ashton awaited with an increasing impatience for the continuation of the narrative. He longed to ask one or two questions, on account of certain vague and strange suspicions which had gradually been engendered in his mind and which were now floating there: but he restrained his curiosity—resolving thus to curb it until Edgar Beverley's tale should be completed.

"The next time that I beheld Louisa," he resumed, "she was walking with her sister and Mr. Maxwell. I made a movement as if to stop and converse with them: but they passed on—and I saw that it was Mrs. Maxwell who was the cause of my being treated with a coldness amounting to actual discourtesy. Not coldness nor discourtesy on sweet Louisa's part!—for she gave me one modest look of tenderness, in silent response to the quick glance of affection which I flung upon her. Weeks passed away; and though I frequently—indeed nearly every day met Louisa—she was always accompanied by her relatives; and they never stopped: but there was a secret voice within my soul, telling me that I was very far from being indifferent to the object of my own growing love; and I was continuously racking my brain for some opportunity of seeing her alone or of corresponding with her. At length I managed to bribe a servant-maid in the Maxwells' household; and she conveyed a letter to Louisa. It contained the avowal of my passion—that avowal which I had already so often made by my looks, but which was now for the first time revealed in language. Through the medium of the friendly domestic, I received an answer, couched in the most modest and delicate terms, but giving me to understand that my love was reciprocated. Frequent letters were now exchanged between us; and at length—also through the medium of the friendly maid—a secret interview was arranged. This took place in the garden at the back of the house at an early hour in the morning, before Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were up. Louisa, with tears in her eyes, assured me that she had suffered much on my account—for that her sister was always accusing her of exchanging significant looks with me whenever we happened to pass. Delicacy forbade me from explaining to Louisa the cause of Mrs. Maxwell's rancorous and unforgiving animosity against me: but I made the most solemn protestations of imperishable affection. In short, Mr. Ashton, I spoke as I believe all lovers do speak to the objects of their regard. I told her that I would write to my uncle and beseech his assent to our union—in which case she might act in total independence of her sister's imperious authority: but Louisa, timid and bashful, and trembling at the idea of flying openly in her sister's face, besought me to wait yet awhile, and trust to a favourable change in existing circumstances. I assented, on condition that she would suffer these meetings to be renewed as often as was possible; and I wrung from her a timidly and tremblingly uttered pledge to this effect. Again did weeks pass on; and we met frequently. Oh! the joy of those meetings, when from two fond hearts commingled the transfusing feelings of purest, holiest love!"

Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of a minute, and with a pensive air evidently dwelt upon the happiness of those interviews to which he had just alluded—a happiness the experience of which he no doubt feared must be regarded as belonging only to the past, and never to be resuscitated.

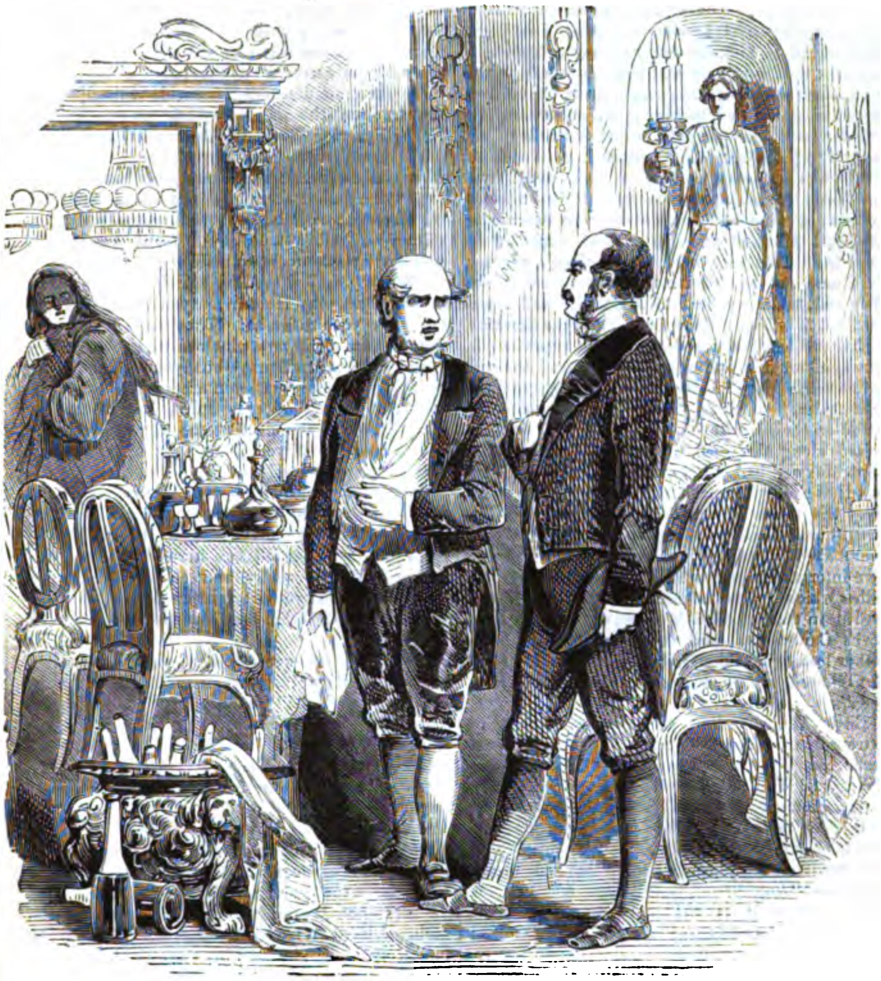
"My narrative is drawing to a close," he at length resumed. "But before I proceed with it, I ought to inform you that on several occasions during the months which had now flown by since I was first quartered in Brighton, I heard vague whispers to the prejudice of Mrs. Maxwell's character. It was stated that previous to her marriage, which had taken place some few years back, her conduct had been characterized by something more than mere levity—that there was also something mysterious attached to her earlier history—and I remember that on one occasion the opinion was expressed that she had actually been the kept mistress of some very rich man, and that in order to obtain a position she had accepted the offer made to her by the infatuated and doating Maxwell. Whether these rumours were true or not, I was then unable to discover: at all events I was certain that never did the faintest breath of scandal sully the fair fame of the lovely and virtuous Louisa: for supposing that those reports *were* correct, Louisa must have been the inmate of a boarding-school at the time her sister was pursuing an equivocal path. I now take up the thread of my narrative, and will speedily bring it to a close. About a fortnight back I was seated with Louisa in a shady arbour in the garden, when we were suddenly surprised by the appearance of Mrs. Maxwell. Her countenance was pale with rage; and she stood gazing upon us with fierce looks,—unable however for the first few moments to give utterance to a word. Louisa was overwhelmed with terror; and I myself was not devoid of confusion. At length I recovered a manly firmness; and I told Mrs. Maxwell that I was devotedly attached to her sister—that my intentions were honourable—and that I was ready to fulfil them as soon as circumstances would permit. She seemed on the point of giving vent to ejaculations of rage, and to level the bitterest reproaches at her sister—when, as if struck by a sudden thought, she became all in a moment calm; and bidding Louisa retire into the house, she remained to converse with me. She coldly asked me what were my prospects? I replied, 'You know that I am the heir presumptive of a wealthy Baronet; and without further delay I will appeal to him for his assent to my marriage with your sister.'—She looked at me in a peculiar manner—a manner which I could not understand; and she said, 'If I had known the first day we met in the streets of Brighton, who you were, I should never, *never* have given you that encouragement which you coldly rejected, and which subjected me to the deepest mortification that a woman can possibly experience.'—This speech struck me as so strange that I stared at her in stupid amazement.—'It is of no use for you to continue thus playing a part,' she said: 'because you cannot deceive me. I know that from the very first you were aware who I was, and that therefore you rejected the advances which under other circumstances a gay and handsome young man would have willingly availed himself of when made by a woman who may flatter herself that she is not altogether deficient in personal beauty. I repeat that when first we encountered each other in the streets, I knew not who *you* were, but you have all along known *me*; though you seem to have been playing a part to make me imagine that you did not. Of what use was this proceeding on your part? If at the first you had told me candidly who *you* were, and that you meant to keep my secret not merely as a man of honour, but likewise through delicate consideration on behalf of my sister, think you that I should have regarded you with hate? No; on the contrary I should have been grateful; and most welcome would you have been at our house. But your chilling coldness towards me from the very first, your reserved and forced politeness, were intended to humiliate me, though you were careful to abstain from verbal expressions of contempt and scorn.'—You may conceive, Mr. Ashton, how infinite was my astonishment while Mrs. Maxwell was thus addressing me. I was stricken speechless—and I continued to gaze upon her with a degree of wonderment which she doubtless began to suspect was truly genuine. She now surveyed me with surprise in her turn; and at length she said, 'Is it possible that I am mistaken? do you really know nothing?'—and then she stopped short, as if fearful of making an admission in case I was really ignorant with regard to the points to which she was thus mysteriously alluding.—'On my soul, madam,' I exclaimed, 'you are speaking to me in the strangest enigmas; and all that you have said compels me to be explicit on certain points, delicate though they are to touch upon. You say that I was cold to you on the first two occasions that we met: but perhaps if my mind had not been full of the loveliness of one who was then a stranger to me, I should have gladly submitted to the influence of your charms. I will ask whether you did not see that I started with surprise on the day that Mr. Maxwell invited me to dine here, and when for the first time I learnt who you were?'—'Enough, Mr. Beverley,' interrupted Mrs. Maxwell; 'I have been labouring under a most extraordinary mistake: I have altogether misunderstood you: I have attributed to you motives which I now see you could not possibly have entertained. I must crave your forgiveness; for my conduct has been most ungenerous. Let us speak no more of the past: let us think only of the purpose that has brought you hither, and of the topic which all along ought to have most interested us.'—Mrs. Maxwell then invited me to enter the house and partake of breakfast. Her husband was both pleased and astonished when she introduced me into the parlour: but she contented herself with the simple observation that there had been some little misapprehension on her part with regard to me, and that it was now cleared up. Louisa was summoned down stairs; and she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw me there, nor her ears when her sister repeated the same observation which she had made to her husband. In short, the happiness of Louisa and myself now seemed all but complete: for Mrs. Maxwell was as courteous and kind as she had formerly been cold and distant. I was utterly at a loss to account for all this: but I cared not to waste time in reflection upon it: I surrendered myself completely up to the bliss of Louisa's society and in being recognised as her accepted suitor."

Here Edgar Beverley stopped again for a few moments, and then proceeded as follows:—

"In the course of that day I had another private interview with Mrs. Maxwell: and she then requested me to be explicit with regard to my intentions. I said that I would write to my uncle that very day, and that as a proof of my honourable views I would show her the letter. She was perfectly satisfied, thanked me for the confidence I reposed in her, but did not decline my offer, as methought she might have done, to suffer the letter to pass through her hands. I went to my quarters to write it; and now more forcibly than ever did I recollect my uncle's imperious injunctions against following in my late father's footsteps and marrying a penniless girl. But love has hope and faith amongst its elements——"

"It has," thought Christian Ashton to himself, as the image of the beauteous Isabella Vincent rose up in his mind.

"And therefore," continued Edgar Beverley, "I flattered myself that my uncle would be moved on my behalf when I assured him in my letter that my happiness was centred in that fair being, who, though without a fortune, was a model of loveliness, amiability, and virtue. When the letter was finished, I sent it in an envelope to Mrs. Maxwell, that she might peruse its contents and then despatch it to the post. You may be sure, Mr. Ashton, that I waited the reply with a considerable degree of suspense, although I endeavoured to persuade myself that it would prove favourable. The return of post brought me the answer: it was singularly brief and laconic—and was to the effect that my uncle had an attack of the gout, or he would have come personally to Brighton to see into the matter and explain his views; but that he had other means of instituting inquiries, and that in the course of a few days I should hear from him again. Within an hour after the receipt of this letter, a note was handed to me by my servant at my quarters: it was from Mrs. Maxwell, requesting that I would abstain from visiting at the house until I should hear from her again. This requisition struck me as singular, but did not fill me with despair. I remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell had been acquainted with my uncle: I thought therefore that they might have written to him by the same post which conveyed my own letter, and that they perhaps had received a reply in such a sense as to originate the request that was now conveyed to me. I persuaded myself that my uncle was taking time for reflection — or perhaps waiting to ascertain through some channel or another whether Louisa was in reality all I had represented, and therefore worthy of becoming my wife. I said to myself that if these conjectures were right, my uncle was sure to give a favourable response, because he could only hear everything that was calculated to enhance the amiable Louisa in his estimation; and I even thought he was acting a prudential part in taking time to make such inquiries, inasmuch as though he had known the Maxwells, yet he had never seen Louisa herself, as she was at school at the time her sister and her brother-in-law were acquainted with my uncle in London. Still I was somewhat restless and uneasy at being debarred the pleasure of visiting Louisa for the present; and I penned a note to her for the purpose of conveying comfort during a separation which I besought her to hope was only temporary. I did not however know precisely how to convey this note: but as I sauntered near the Maxwells' dwelling—taking care not to be seen from the windows—I met the friendly servant-maid. From her I learnt that in consequence of a letter received in the morning, Mrs. Maxwell had suddenly set off on a journey, and that it was not known whither she had gone. I was likewise told that Louisa was sitting with her old brother-in-law in the drawing-room; and he appeared, from what I could gather, to have been instructed to keep a watch over her movements. Moreover the day was a rainy one; and there was no pretext for Louisa to issue forth. The maid undertook to deliver my note; and I returned to the barracks, wondering what this sudden journey on Mrs. Maxwell's part could mean—but connecting it with my own love-affair. On reaching the barracks, I strolled into the mess-room, where four or five of my brother-officers were in conversation with a gentleman in plain clothes. This gentleman was an officer in the Guards, and had come down to Brighton on the previous day for a short trip. At the moment I entered, he was relating an anecdote, which speedily became vitally interesting to me.—'I was up just now at the railway-station,' he said, 'to make some inquiry relative to a lost carpet-bag; and while I was lounging there, waiting to see a train go off, I fell in with an old flame of mine. I knew her intimately some nine or ten years ago: she was a lovely creature then—she is a splendidly handsome woman still. She passed from my hands into the keeping of a rich old Baronet. Stop a moment, and I shall remember his name!'—He reflected for a few instants; and then suddenly recalling to mind the name which he sought, he mentioned that of my own uncle. My brother-officers laughingly informed him that he was thus speaking in the presence of the nephew of the old Baronet whom he had just mentioned; and he in a similar laughing mood exclaimed, 'Well, I am sure that Mr. Beverley, if he happens to know this lady, will admire his uncle's taste. Let me see: she married afterwards, and turned quite steady, I believe. Who was it that she married? Ah, I recollect! an old fellow with years enough to fit him to be her grandfather, but with some little property: and so she became Mrs. Maxwell.'—I should here observe that my love for Louisa had been kept altogether a secret from my brother-officers; and thus they neither knew how interested nor how pained I was by the startling disclosure that had just reached my ears. My endeavour to laugh and seem unconcerned was but a sickly one; and I sped to my own room, there to give way to my reflections. Could the tale be true?—but dared I doubt it? Did it not corroborate the whispers that I had already heard in respect to Mrs. Maxwell's character? and did it not fully account for her strange behaviour towards me while labouring under the idea that I all along knew of her former equivocal connexion with my uncle? Nor less did it account for the strange language in which she had addressed me on the morning when she had surprised Louisa and myself together in the garden. I also comprehended why she had so readily accepted my proposal to show her the letter that I was to pen to my uncle: she doubtless wished to be sure of the terms in which I should speak of herself, so that she might positively ascertain whether I was sincere in professing my ignorance of her antecedents. I was deeply grieved to think that Louisa was so closely connected with such a woman; and then I blamed myself for this feeling, inasmuch as I knew Louisa herself to be the most immaculate of beings. While pursuing my reflections, methought that Mrs. Maxwell's journey might now be explained; and I conjectured



that she had gone to confer personally with my uncle, who, I should observe, was at his country seat in this county where you and I, Mr. Ashton, now are."

"Proceed," said Christian impatiently: for all his former suspicions were now well nigh strengthened into complete confirmation.

"It will require not many details to complete my tale," resumed Edgar Beverley. "Three days ago I received a note from Mrs. Maxwell, dated from the house at Brighton, and therefore showing that she had returned home. It was to the effect that after mature consideration, and under all circumstances, she begged in the most positive manner to decline on her sister's behalf the proposals of marriage which I had made. The billet contained no more: it was thus cruelly concise and laconic. But scarcely had I read it, and while still labouring under the influence of the dreadful shock it occasioned, another letter was brought to me. This was from my uncle. It professed the deepest regard for my welfare, and went on to state that the inquiries he had instituted in respect to the matter that I had communicated to him, were so far from satisfactory he was compelled to put a firm negative upon the request I had made for his assent upon the point. He charged me not to write to him again on the same topic, under penalty of his serious displeasure; and he added that if I left Brighton with the intention of seeking a personal interview in the hope of inducing him to alter his decision, he should regard it as a downright act of rebellion against his authority, and would order his doors to be closed against me. Such was the letter I received; and I flew off like one frantic to the Maxwells' house to demand explanations. There I learnt that Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed together at an early hour that morning (the former had only returned from her journey on the preceding evening). Mr. Maxwell was at home: but he positively refused to see me. The servants knew not whither their mistress and Louisa had gone: but I was determined to find out and seek explanations. I thought that my uncle had been by some means prejudiced against Louisa; and yet if Mrs. Maxwell had really been to him, it did not seem natural to conclude that *she* would have been the person so prejudicing him against her own sister. There was a hideous mystery in it all; and I knew not what to conjecture. I flew to the railway-station: but no ladies answering the description of Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed by any train that morning. An accident which I need not pause to describe, put me on their track: they had taken a vehicle to Hastings—and I was resolved to follow. Hurrying back to the barracks, I obtained leave of absence from the superior officer in command, and set off. I traced the two ladies to Hastings: thence they had departed in a post-chaise. I also took a post-chaise—and followed on their track. From the information I received along the road, it appeared evident that Mrs. Maxwell had anticipated pursuit on my part, and that she had exerted all her ingenuity to destroy the traces of her route. She had taken a circuitous one—she had frequently changed vehicles—and she had evidently bribed persons who could give information, and who *did* give it too for the bribes which I also lavished. To be brief, I succeeded in tracing Mrs. Maxwell and her sister as far as Canterbury; and there the clue was altogether lost. Bewildered what course to adopt—— But I need say no more: I came on to Ramsgate."

Edgar Beverley thus abruptly terminated his extraordinary narrative; and Christian at once exclaimed, "I will tell you why you came on to Ramsgate! You thought of obtaining an interview with your uncle—but you have suffered the whole of this day to pass, because you have hesitated and trembled—you have been haunted by misgivings, but bewildered by their vagueness and uncertainty——"

"Yes, yes—it is so!" ejaculated Beverley, with mingled amazement and suspense. "But how——"

"Because," interrupted Christian, speaking rapidly and excitedly, "by a remarkable series of incidents I have been placed in a position enabling me to throw much light upon that which is at present dark to your view."

"You?" cried Beverley, with a suspense that now reached to fever-point.

"Yes!—and to prove that it is so," continued our hero, "I will at once give you the right names of those whom you have introduced by fictitious ones—as well as that of your uncle whose name throughout your narrative you have not mentioned at all!"

"Good heavens, is this possible?" exclaimed Edgar, starting up from his seat.

"Yes," rejoined Christian: "judge for yourself! Your uncle is Sir John Steward—Mrs. Maxwell is Mrs. Oxenden—and the name of Louisa is a substitute for the real one of Laura."

"True!" cried Edgar in the wildest amazement. "But how, my dear friend—how——"

"Listen," interrupted Christian; "and I will tell you everything. But pray be calm and collected."

Our hero then proceeded to explain all those particulars which have been related to the reader, from the moment when he had seen the breaking-down of the carriage on the previous evening, to that when he descended from his hiding-place in the tree on the day of which we are writing. Edgar Beverley listened with mingled indignation and amazement; and scarcely had Christian finished, when the lieutenant snatched up his hat, exclaiming, "The foulest treachery is at work—but I will rush to Verner House—I will unmask the conspiracy—I will rescue my beloved Laura—and then let my vile uncle do his worst!"

"Stop!" said Christian, springing forward to catch Beverley by the arm: "you will ruin everything by your rashness! The door will be closed against you—it is now nine o'clock in the evening—you will not see Laura—but you will make her persecutors aware that you are here in the neighbourhood—and they may spirit her off to some other place in the dead of the night. I beseech you to be calm—if you value your happiness and that of the young lady——"

"Oh, you are indeed my friend!" exclaimed Beverley, struck by the force of Christian's words. "For heaven's sake advise me how to act!"

"I will," responded our hero: "sit down and let us deliberate coolly and collectedly. From what I have told you, it is tolerably evident that your uncle Sir John Steward contemplates marriage——"

"Yes: for it was a priest whom you saw," exclaimed Edgar; "and Laura is a Catholic. But pray proceed!" he added with feverish impatience.

"The only means," continued our hero, "will be for you to communicate with the young lady, and obtain information from her how she may be rescued."

"Yes, yes: that is indeed the best—the only means!" cried Edgar. "But how is it to be accomplished? how can a letter be conveyed to her? who will be the bearer of it?"

"Yes—how? who?" said Christian, reflectingly. "Oh, I have it!—the mountebank!"—and he sprang up in delight from his seat.

"What mean you?" inquired Edgar, with excited quickness.

"Remain here—patiently, if you can!—but at all events remain here!" exclaimed our hero: "and leave it to me!"—with which words he sped from the apartment.

But while bursting into the street to execute the object which he had in view, Christian Ashton little suspected that at this selfsame moment his beloved sister was passing through a painful ordeal,—which must be described in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CHRISTINA'S ADVENTURES.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening: the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton were walking together in the garden attached to the villa at Bayswater. A long pause had followed some conversation on intellectual topics; her Highness fell into a reverie; and Christina was almost as soon absorbed in her own separate thoughts. At length Indora, suddenly arousing herself from her train of meditation, observed in a kind tone, "I am truly glad that your brother has obtained another situation: I hope he will be comfortable in it. But rest assured, my dear Christina, that if he had not succeeded in thus employing himself, I should have devised the means to do something for him."

"I know and deeply appreciate all your ladyship's goodness," answered our young and beautiful heroine. "You gave us both a signal proof of your generous sympathy on our behalf, when your ladyship bade me proffer a sum of money for Christian's use——"

"And he declined it," observed the Princess; "because he had been provident and had a pecuniary resource of his own. That circumstance raised him higher than ever in my estimation. I feel convinced that he will do well: and you have a right to be proud of such a brother."

"We are indeed devotedly attached to each other," responded Christina. "Being twins—our orphan condition likewise—the reliance which we had to place in each other——"

"I understand it all," said the Princess. "Those circumstances have combined to strengthen and enhance the love of brother and sister which naturally subsisted between you. And I am glad of this opportunity of giving you the assurance, my dear young friend, that should circumstances soon transpire to induce me to return to my native land, it shall be my care to place you in a position that will render you independent for the future."

Christina was melted to tears by this evidence of generosity and good feeling on the part of the Indian lady; and warmly but tremulously she expressed her gratitude. Almost immediately afterwards the Princess entered the house: but Christina lingered in the garden to ramble there a little while longer; for the evening was beautiful—and she was in one of those moods when she wished to be alone with her own thoughts. The reader will not be surprised if when thus alone the image of her beloved friend Zoe rose up in her mind; and that by a very natural association, it likewise conjured up Lord Octavian Meredith to her thoughts. It will be remembered that the young maiden had already so far analyzed her feelings as to be unable to repel the conviction that Octavian was not altogether indifferent to her: but she was ever doing her best and striving her hardest to expel his image from her mind. Indeed, she never contemplated it fixedly: the immaculate purity of her soul would not suffer her mental vision to dwell with passionate intentness upon that image under existing circumstances. Yet she could not altogether prevent it from often and often floating vaguely in her mind: for with all her innocence—with all her anxiety to martyrise her own feelings when she found them passing into a forbidden channel—she could not exercise a complete power over her volition.

Christina remained in the garden, as we have said, after the Princess had quitted it on the evening of which we are writing; and for nearly half-an-hour she was occupied with her thoughts. Presently—when near that fence which has already been so often mentioned as overlooking a contiguous field—she thought she heard a sudden rustling amongst a dense knot of evergreens on one side of the gravel-walk where her delicate feet were treading. For a moment she was startled by the circumstance: but the next instant recovering her self-possession, she conjectured it must have been the rush of a cat—for there was not a sufficient breeze thus to agitate the foliage. She thought to herself, as some tale recently told her by the Princess sprang up in her memory, that if she was in that eastern lady's native land, she would in a moment have fled wildly away from the spot, lest some monstrous reptile should suddenly fling forth its hideous coils around her, or lest some savage animal should spring forth upon her. She could not help thanking heaven for having made her the native of a land whose climate, though so much maligned, renders it impossible for such causes of terror to exist: but little suspected she for an instant that where no monstrous snake can conceal its slimy folds, and where no savage animal can hide itself in ambush, a human being with scarcely less treacherous intent may find a lurking place. And so it was on the present occasion: for scarcely had Christina turned to leave the spot where a sudden alarm had for an instant arrested her steps,—when she was pounced upon by a man who darted forth from amidst the evergreens. So abrupt was the occurrence—so frightfully quick did it seem to follow upon those ideas of the serpent and the wild beast which had just been flitting through her mind—that it overwhelmed her with terror; insomuch that the very cry which rose up to her lips, was checked at the moment it was about to burst forth—and she lost all consciousness.

Sudden as was that attack—suddenly too as she sank into a swoon—with an equal suddenness was she made aware, when startled back to life, that some violent altercation was taking place. She was inside a common cab: a man was seated next to her—a woman with a thick veil opposite. The vehicle had stopped; and the cabman was venting his abuse upon the coachman of another equipage. A glance from the window showed Christina that this scene was taking place close by the Oxford Street entrance to Hyde Park. It was doubtless the sudden shock which the cab sustained on coming into collision with the other vehicle, that had startled Christina back to consciousness. That other vehicle was a private carriage, the coachman of which was throwing the blame of the collision upon the cabman,—while the latter recriminated in a much coarser style; and with a horrible imprecation he demanded to know who was to pay him for his broken shaft? For the first few moments all this appeared to Christina to be nothing but a dream—an illusion which was more or less sustained by the duskiness of the hour and the obscurity which therefore prevailed inside the cab. But the conviction of the scene's reality soon struck her mind: the man was on her left hand—the veiled woman was opposite—the street lamps were glaring on either side—the altercation was taking place close by.

"Sit down, Miss!" said the woman vehemently, as Christina in wild affright was about to lower one of the windows:—and it was with a foreign accent that this woman spoke.

"I insist upon being suffered to alight!" said Christina, with an another effort to lower the window—in which however she was baffled by the woman seizing her violently by both her wrists.

"The shaft is broken! what is to be done?" hastily said the man who was seated next to Christina, and who was the same that had captured her in the garden.

"The shaft broken?" echoed Madame Angelique—for she indeed it was into whose power our heroine had fallen, and who wore the veil to guard herself against future recognition. "Pray, my dear Miss——"

"Release me!—I insist upon being released!" screamed Christina: and the next instant one of her fair hands was dashed through the glass.

Her shriek thrilled forth: Madame Angelique —almost maddened by the dilemma in which she found herself placed by the collision of the two vehicles, and by the dread of exposure—seized our heroine by the throat, muttering, "Silence, girl! —or I will throttle you!"

The mingled terror and pain which the poor girl experienced, caused her to swoon off once more; and when for the second time she recovered her consciousness, she found that she was being lifted from a vehicle by a couple of female servants. The first impression which now seized upon her was that she was still in the power of her enemies; and with a scream she released herself from the hold which was upon her. But this hold was a friendly one: a voice which she recognised, gave her a kind assurance: for the maidservant who had thus spoken to her was the daughter of that landlady who had originally recommended her as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith. Christina experienced a sudden sense of safety—but had no power of lucid recollection. Stupified by all that had occurred—and feeling as if her senses were again about to abandon her—unable, in a word, to bear up against the effects of this series of incidents through which she was hurried—she mechanically abandoned herself to the care of the two servant-maids, and was conducted into a house which she had not been enabled to recognise on account of the dimness which came over her vision. Such too was the confusion of her thoughts, that though she had recognised the voice of Jessie Giles, and knew it to be a friendly one, it did not at the instant strike her where she had known the girl before: but when placed upon a sofa in a handsomely-furnished room—when wine-and-water was proffered her, and the two domestics were doing all they could to revive her from that listless condition which bordered so closely upon unconsciousness—a light suddenly flashed in to the mind of our heroine. She knew where she was!—the apartment was indeed familiar enough to her: it was one of the elegantly-furnished parlours of Lord Octavian Meredith's residence. Then naturally enough the idea smote her that it was he who had caused her to be carried off; and shocked as well as horrified by the belief of such tremendous perfidy, she burst into tears.

"Let me go hence! let me depart!" she the next moment exclaimed, dashing away those tears, and becoming violently excited with mingled alarm and indignation. "Your vile master shall not keep me here!"—and she rushed to the door.

"For heaven's sake, Miss Ashton, compose yourself!" said Jessie Giles, springing after her. "You are mistaken!—it is his lordship who rescued you—and his carriage is ordered to wait to convey you home, wherever it may be."

Now another revulsion of feelings took place in the bosom of Christina; and she comprehended in a moment all the strength of the insulting suspicion to which she had given way towards Lord Octavian Meredith. She sank upon a seat; and pressing her hand to her brow, burst into another flood of tears.

"Do pray compose yourself, Miss!" repeated Jessie. "You must know that you are in safety here! But it is natural you should be frightened —for from what little his lordship said to us when the carriage stopped at the front door, you have been outrageously treated. Indeed, it was very fortunate our coachman *had* taken a drop too much and run against the cab—or else you might not have been delivered from the hands of those people."

"I hope you will not repeat to his lordship," said Christina earnestly, "the words which I uttered——I was half wild—I gave vent to anything which came into my head——"

"Here is his lordship!" said Jessie: and she at once withdrew from the apartment, followed by her fellow-servant.

It was simply from motives of respect that the women retired: for they had not the faintest idea that Christina would not for worlds have thus found herself alone with their master. She had not the power to stop those women: she was shocked at the thought of the insulting suspicion to which she had abandoned herself, and which contrasted so strikingly with the sense of gratitude which on the other hand she ought to have felt towards her deliverer. She could not even rise from her seat as Meredith advanced towards her, and in the gentlest tones of his musical voice inquired if she felt better? It was a perfect consternation of bewilderment that was upon her—a distressing sense of confused thoughts, and with an utter uncertainty what she ought to say or how she ought to act.

But one word of explanation ere we pursue the thread of our narrative. Meredith, who was returning home in his carriage when the collision took place,—he having been dining at his club,—thrust his head out of the window to put an end to the altercation by telling the cabman who he was and ordering his coachman at once to drive on. Then was heard the sound of the crashing glass of the cab-window, instantaneously followed by a shriek; and Meredith, convinced there was something wrong—though little expecting to meet Christina—sprang forth from the carriage. Several persons collected upon the spot; and Madame Angelique told them from the window that she was a tradeswoman of respectability, and that she was merely taking home a runaway apprentice. She thought the lie would serve her, as Christina had fainted and therefore could not contradict it. But Meredith insisted on investigating the matter further: he tore open the cab-door—he recognised Christina—and an ejaculation of amazement burst from his lips. To take her in his arms and bear her to his own carriage, was the work of the next few moments,—during which Madame Angelique and her male accomplice thought it best to beat a retreat,—the infamous woman having hastily slipped a couple of sovereigns into the cabman's hand. The crowd had passed round towards the handsome carriage to which Christina was now consigned: no opposition was therefore offered to the flight of the Frenchwoman and her accomplice,—who, we may as well observe, was her own footman, dressed in plain clothes. Lord Octavian Meredith's equipage drove off; and the crowd remained to question the cabman as to the meaning of these proceedings: but he, apprehensive of unpleasant consequences on his own account, vowed and protested he knew nothing more than that he had been hailed a short way off by the party, and that the young girl had apparently stepped into the vehicle without any reluctance on her own side.

Meantime the young nobleman's equipage was rolling away towards the Regent's Park; and his arm supported the inanimate form of the beloved Christina. What unexpected happiness for the adoring Octavian! Would the reader believe us if we were to profess ignorance as to whether he imprinted a kiss upon her cheek?—it were contrary to all knowledge of human nature to suppose that he abstained. Yet though they were alone together inside the carriage, and she was unconscious of what was passing,—it was with the purest delicacy he sustained her inanimate form: he did not press it with passionate vehemence in his arms:—his love for the beauteous Christina was indeed of a holy character, apart from his position as the husband of another, which alone rendered that love unholy!

And now we may resume the thread of our narrative at the point where we interrupted it to give the preceding explanations. Christina and Lord Octavian were alone together in the apartment,—she seated as if transfixed upon the chair—he standing near her, bending slightly down, and breathing inquiries tenderly respectful, as to whether she felt better.

"My lord," she answered, slowly recovering her self-possession, "I have to thank you for the service you have rendered me. I cannot comprehend the meaning of the outrage which dragged me from my home: nor can I conceive who were its perpetrators. But that is of little consequence now, since I am indebted to your lordship for my safety."

"Rest assured, Miss Ashton," responded Meredith, hastening to set himself altogether right in her estimation with regard to one point which he felt might need an explanatory word, "that if I had known where you dwelt, I should have at once conveyed you thither: but I never knew—I was never told——and—and—I never dared to ask!"

"With a renewed expression of my thanks to your lordship," said Christina, rising from her seat, "I will now take my departure:"—then, as a sudden thought struck her, she added, "May I request that one of the domestics be desired to fetch a vehicle to take me to my home?"

"My carriage is at your service," replied Meredith, who comprehended the meaning of Christina's request. "Hesitate not to make use of it: for most solemnly do I pledge my word that I will not inquire of the domestics who are in attendance upon it, where you dwell."

Christina liked not the arrangement: but she dared not fling another insult at the young nobleman by rejecting it—which would have been tantamount to an expression of mistrust in respect to the pledge he had just given her. She therefore said with modest bashfulness, "I will avail myself of your lordship's kindness."

"O Christina!" suddenly exclaimed Meredith, carried completely away by his feelings of devoted love and ardent admiration, as he gazed upon the beautiful being who stood before him,—"wherefore thus cold and distant? wherefore so freezing in your manner? My God: will you not bestow one kind look upon me, Christina?"

"My lord," she said, with a calm dignity, "you will not ungenerously avail yourself of the painful and embarrassing position into which circumstances have thrown me——"

"O Christina, one word!—only one word!" he vehemently cried. "Is it a sin to love you? is it a crime to concentrate all my hopes of happiness in this world upon *one* idea—the idea that you may yet be my own adored and cherished wife?"

"My lord, I cannot—I will not listen to this language!" exclaimed Christina: "it is an insult to Zoe—an insult to myself!"—and she moved towards the door.

"Now," cried Meredith, "if you depart in anger, you will leave me so truly wretched that I shall do something desperate! Yes—by heaven, Christina——"

"Oh, this threat which you have held out before!" were the wildly uttered words that thrilled from Christina's lips: and she pressed her hand in anguish and bewilderment to her brow.

"Christina, I am not indifferent to you," exclaimed Octavian, in a voice of exultant joy: "tell me, tell me that I am not indifferent!—tell me that you will live for me, as I am living for you——for *she* cannot live! Oh, speak to me!—for God's sake speak to me!"

He sank at her feet—he seized one of her hands—the other was pressed against her brow: he was about to convey the former to his lips—but with a sudden and vehement effort she snatched it from him—and the next instant the door closed behind her. Meredith dared not follow: he felt all in a moment that it would indeed be flagrantly insulting to the pure mind of Christina, if he were thus far to forget himself. He sank upon a seat—buried his countenance in his hands—and gave way to his agitated reflections.

Meanwhile Miss Ashton had passed out into the hall, where she found Jessie and the other maid-servant. Her ears caught no following footsteps; and she therefore comprehended that the delicacy of Meredith's feelings had prevailed over the strength of his passion. She hesitated not to linger for a few moments in the hall, while Jessie Giles hastened to fetch one of her own bonnets and shawls to lend the young lady. Then—having in the meantime decided *not* to avail herself of the carriage, for fear that in some insensate moment Octavian should forget the pledge which he had given—she hastened away on foot. She was soon overtaken by an empty cab, which she entered;

and in a little less than an hour, reached the villa at Bayswater in safety.

There she acquainted the Princess, who had been very uneasy at her sudden disappearance, with the particulars of the outrage which had been perpetrated against her; and all that she omitted from the tale, was that rapid but exciting scene with Lord Octavian Meredith which we have just been describing. Indora gathered enough from what Christina said, to convince her that the Frenchwoman could be none other than Madame Angelique: but she did not intimate that she had any knowledge of that disreputable person. Deeply indignant was the Princess at the treatment which her young friend had sustained: but she was tototally at a loss to conceive what could be the motive of the abduction, unless it were to purvey some fresh victim to the lusts of Madame Angelique's patrons. Christina retired at once to her chamber,—where she was most kindly ministered unto by the Princess herself, who watched by her side until sleep at length closed the young maiden's eyes.

There was one person beneath that roof who understood full well what the outrage meant, and who inwardly deplored its failure,—but who outwardly testified sympathy on behalf of our heroine. This was Sagoonah.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE SUPPER-EATER.

THE scene now changes. On that same evening of which we are writing, a masked ball took place at Buckingham Palace. The invitations, which were most numerous, had been issued to all the principal members of the aristocracy, male and female, and to the most distinguished persons of the fashionable world. As a matter of course all the preparations were of the most splendid and sumptuous description: for Royalty has got nothing to do but to dip its hand into the public purse which hard-worked and severely-taxed Industry is forced to keep continuously filled, in order to procure all imaginable pleasures for itself, and to entertain its friends, its flatterers, and its hangers-on.

The greater portion of the company appeared in fancy-costume: but there were several—chiefly the highest personages, male and female, of the aristocracy—who were apparelled in their usual manner. Amongst those present was the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, who had again run over to England (at the public expense, be it well understood) to visit his illustrious relative; and in order that this faithful chronicle of events may omit no detail calculated to prove interesting to the reader, it must be added that his Royal Highness did actually and veritably wear a new uniform upon the occasion. Little did he suspect, while mingling in the gaieties of Buckingham Palace, that his late Groom of the Stole had on that very same day been seen by his late English secretary so industriously though somewhat ignominiously employed in beating a drum and running his lips along the tubes of a mouth-organ. There too, amidst that company, was the Duke of Marchmont, who was glad to seek in any scene of excitement a relief from the vague but painful apprehensions which haunted him in respect to the Princess Indora. In respect to the Queen and Prince Albert, the newspapers of the following day assured their readers that her Majesty never appeared in better spirits, and that her illustrious consort was observed to be in the enjoyment of admirable health,—which piece of intelligence no doubt afforded the highest satisfaction at all the breakfast tables where the journals aforesaid were perused on the morning after this grand entertainment.

But for the masked ball itself. All those who wore fancy-costume, were bound to maintain their *incognito* until two o'clock in the morning, so that there might be no relaxation of the merriment and gaiety until such time as all the wit and humour of the masked unknowns might be exhausted! Even this length of time that was thus prescribed, was founded on the calculation that the wit and humour of the aristocratic assemblage would last for several hours: so that when the average dulness of the aristocratic intellect is taken into account, it becomes quite clear that the patrician orders possess an enviable facility of amusing themselves.

Now, it must be understood that the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had come over to England with precisely the same retinue—the illustrious Raggidbak excepted—that he had brought with him on the previous occasion: but upon some private understanding to which he had come with his relative the Prince, the Grand Duke had introduced none of his precious horde at the masked ball of which we are writing. Therefore Count Wronki, the Lord Steward—the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Lord Chamberlain—General Himmelspinken, the Master of the Horse—Herr Hombogh, the Lord Privy Seal—the Chevalier Kadger, Chief Equerry—Count Frumpenhausen, the Gold Stick—and Baron Farthenless, the Privy Purse, had all been left at Mivart's Hotel to play at dominoes for halfpence, or to rack their brains for the means of procuring some more substantial recreation. Deeply indignant were these great men at what they conceived to be the slight put upon them; and they presently took counsel together to see whether they could possibly indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the gilded saloons of British Royalty. All of a sudden a luminous idea struck the Chevalier Kadger: and having communicated it to his worthy compeers, it was unanimously voted that he should forthwith put it into execution. The Chevalier was about to set forth for the purpose, when he recollected that he should require a cab to take him in haste to Buckingham Palace, and bring him back again to Mivart's Hotel to communicate the result of his mission. Two shillings at the least would be the required fare; and this amount, after some little delay, was scraped together in halfpence from the pockets of those illustrious German noblemen and gentlemen. But when the Chevalier Kadger had departed, strange misgivings sprang up in the breasts of those whom he had left behind, lest he should merely drop into the nearest public-house, drink and smoke out the large funds confided to him for a special purpose, and then come back to assure them with all the impudence in the world that he had been to the Palace but had failed in the accomplishment of his mission. However, there was now no help for it but to wait; and therefore, by way of a little pastime for the next hour or so, those amiable Germans sustained an incessant quarrel amongst themselves. But the result of the proceeding showed that a nicer sense of honour dwelt in the breast of the Chevalier Kadger than his friends gave him credit for: inasmuch as at the expiration of about an hour and a half, he re-appeared with a face that was very red and very radiant. The redness arose from a strong glass of brandy-and-water of which he had partaken in the servants' hall at Buckingham Palace; and the radiancy was derived from the complete success which had crowned his mission: so that after all, the Chevalier's companions found they had wrongfully suspected their upright comrade, and that he had *not* turned into the nearest public-house to drink and smoke out the two shillings accumulated in halfpence.

We now return to Buckingham Palace itself. It was verging towards midnight; and the doors of the refreshment rooms had been thrown open for those who thought fit to avail themselves of the viands and the wines, the fruits and the liqueurs, so profusely set out upon the tables. It was however deemed too early for a general influx of the company to these rooms; and but few domestics remained there in attendance. The head-butler was nevertheless at his post near the sideboard; and instead of lounging there, he stood statue-like with that prim formality which had become habitual. Presently a solitary guest, whose form and countenance were completely concealed by a long flowing domino, strolled in a leisurely manner into the refreshment-room — surveyed the profusely covered tables through a small opening in his hood —and then seating himself, began paying his respects to cold chicken and ham. The butler at once let fly the cork of a bottle of champagne, which he placed upon the table near the solitary supper-eater; and the contents of that bottle speedily disappeared down the supper-eater's throat. But it could scarcely be a matter of surprise that he required so considerable a quantity of wine, inasmuch as it had to wash down a proportionate amount of food: for it was no ordinary supper of which this gentleman had partaken. He kept his hood all the time over his head, and as much over his countenance too as the process of eating and drinking would permit: but this circumstance was no source of marvel to the butler, inasmuch as he knew that the masques were to preserve their *incognito* until a prescribed hour; — and with this knowledge likewise, the other domestics in attendance abstained, with a becoming delicacy, from standing anywhere in front of the supper-eater, so that they might not have the appearance of being inspired by curiosity to ascertain who he was. Having partaken of a copious repast, emptied the champagne-bottle, and finished off with a few glasses of sherry and port, the gentleman in the domino issued from the room.

About twenty minutes elapsed, during which a few other guests strolled in to partake of wine or lemonade, but of nothing more substantial; and the butler was still maintaining his post at the sideboard, when he was recalled from a temporary fit of abstraction to the fact that the identical domino of the copious supper-eater was again introducing itself to his visual perception. The worthy butler of course thought that it could be nothing more than the mere curiosity of an idle lounger strolling in to see how things were progressing in the refreshment-room: but scarcely could that same butler believe his own eyes, when he saw the domino sit down quietly at the table, and commence a vigorous attack upon the viands nearest. It required no small circumstance to shake the butler from the equilibrium of his prim formal dignity: but at this spectacle, which comprised the rapid disappearance of a savoury pie, he certainly *did* look aghast. However, he had his duty to perform; and when regaining his self-possession, he lost no time in accomplishing it. Another bottle of champagne was accordingly drawn and placed on the table for the behoof of the supper-eater. The meal on this occasion was not less copious than the former one, either in respect to solids or fluids; and having, as the butler thought, not merely appeased but most outrageously gorged his appetite, the domino departed from the refreshment-room.

Three or four other guests almost immediately made their appearance; and thus the attendant domestics had no opportunity to give verbal expression amongst themselves to the wonder which they did not the less experience at the gastronomic feat achieved by the domino. At length, however, the room was once more empty; and the butler was just marvelling within himself whether the great supper-eater felt comfortable in the condition of a gorged boa-constrictor—when his eyes settled on the same identical domino once more!

"Surely," thought the butler to himself, "he is never coming for a third supper?"—and the attendant domestics exchanged rapid glances amongst themselves with a similar significancy.

But the domino in question *had* returned for the most substantial of purposes. Down he sate—deep was the incision which his knife made into the breast of a superb capon—ham and tongue from neighbouring dishes found their way to his plate—and when the champagne was placed by his side, he quaffed glass after glass with a rapidity and a zest which seemed in perfect keeping with the gigantic magnitude of his appetite. The butler was astounded: he stared at the brilliant chandelier pendant in the centre of the room, to convince himself that he was broad awake—but he could not quite succeed in coming to a conclusion on the point; and still therefore he had a vague idea that he must have been dozing and dreaming—an impression which lasted for the next twenty minutes that followed the departure of the supper-eater from the room.

The guests now began to make their appearance in greater numbers; and some of them sate down at table. The butler became so occupied that his thoughts ceased gradually to dwell with so much intentness upon the incidents we have been relating—until all of a sudden they were again concentrated on the same point, and with a more powerful intensity than ever, on beholding the reappearance of the particular domino.

"Good heavens!" thought the butler to himself, "is it possible that he is coming for a fourth supper? No—it cannot be! It is a downright physical impossibility! 'No human creature could have a capacity for such an inordinate amount of food!"

The worthy butler was however wrong: for down sate the domino—again an inroad was commenced upon the viands—another bottle of champagne was done ample justice to. A vague terror stole over the butler: childhood's stories of voracious ghouls came back to his memory—he felt ill at ease—and yet he dared not betray what he had experienced.

"If," he said to himself, "he had now come just to taste the jelly, the whipped cream, the blanc-mange, or some trifle of that sort, one might possibly understand it: but to think that he should now, on his fourth appearance, sit down to devour the best half of that perigord-pie, is something unnatural to a degree. And then too the wine! It is quite clear that when he gets up from his seat, he will reel about in a terrible state of intoxication."

But the supper-eater did nothing of the sort. When a repast quite as copious as any of the preceding ones, had been disposed of, the domino took his departure with an admirable steadiness of gait: so that it seemed as if four bottles of champagne and at least two of sherry and port, to say nothing of a few glasses of liqueur, had produced not the slightest effect upon the brain of that extraordinary unknown. As for the attendant domestics—they would have been almost as much confounded as the butler himself, were it not that the nature of their duties kept him in a more vital state of calamity.

The guests were now crowding more and more to the refreshment room; and the process of eating and drinking without taking off their masks or throwing back the hoods of their dominoes, gave rise to much gaiety and merriment—yet all partially subdued by that well-bred fastidiousness which keeps down laughter to a low key in the saloons of aristocracy or within the walls of Royalty's dwelling. Nevertheless, there was quite sufficient animation to wean the butler away from the unpleasant reflections which had been passing in his mind,—until the unfortunate man was destined to receive an almost overpowing shock on beholding the domino make his fifth appearance!

"If he is going to sit down and devour another supper," said the unfortunate and bewildered butler to himself, "I shall know that I am a madman—that I am haunted by delusions—and for fear lest I should do any body a mischief, I will rush off to Bedlam, knock at the door, and insist upon being taken in."

Yet though the domino had come back for a fifth repast, the butler did not carry out his threat of self-immolation at the shrine of Lunacy. But for some minutes he remained transfixed in blank dismay, like one who was gazing upon an apparition from the dead. He even forgot to place more champagne upon the table, until reminded of his duty by his deputy, who was present. The butler gasped as if about to make some observation but was unable to give utterance to it: and then he proceeded to draw another bottle of champagne. But now a thought struck him.

"He surely would like a bottle of burgundy," he said to himself, "after so much champagne?"

And this idea was immediately followed by another. If the butler could but obtain a glimpse of the astounding supper-eater's features, it would be a relief to his mind to ascertain that it was really a human face which possessed the organ that took in so huge a quantity of sustenance. The butler accordingly proceeded in person to where the supper-eater was seated; and bending down—but not without a certain degree of apprehension, lest he should catch a glimpse of something frightful—he said, "I beg your pardon, sir—my lord—your Grace"—(for he did not of course know which appellation was right)—"but I thought perhaps a little burgundy might now be agreeable."

"Champagne!" was the single word which came from the supper-eater's lips: it was sternly pronounced—and at the same moment the butler caught a glimpse of a very fierce moustache through the opening in the domino.

Abashed and dismayed, the worthy functionary returned to the sideboard and despatched the champagne to the voracious domino. It was soon disposed of; and the repast devoured upon this occasion, was, if anything, more copious than the preceding ones. The domino then withdrew, walking as steadily as if he had only been drinking water, and *not* tumbling down dead with apoplexy ere he reached the door—as the astounded butler thought that he assuredly must. He disappeared from the view: and a prolonged sigh emanated from the heart of the miserable butler.

It was now about half-past one o'clock; and the company quitted the refreshment room to return into the other apartments, to hold themselves in readiness for the general unmasking that was shortly to take place. Once more was the butler left in that room with only the attendant domestics. But he could not keep his eyes away from the gilded portals; and though every instant he really expected to behold the re-appearance of the unconscionable supper-eater,—yet he endeavoured to persuade himself that such an event was beyond the limits of all human possibility. At length some one did appear—but not the domino: it was Prince Albert.

"Well," said his Royal Highness to the butler, "has everything gone off well?—have the company enjoyed themselves?"

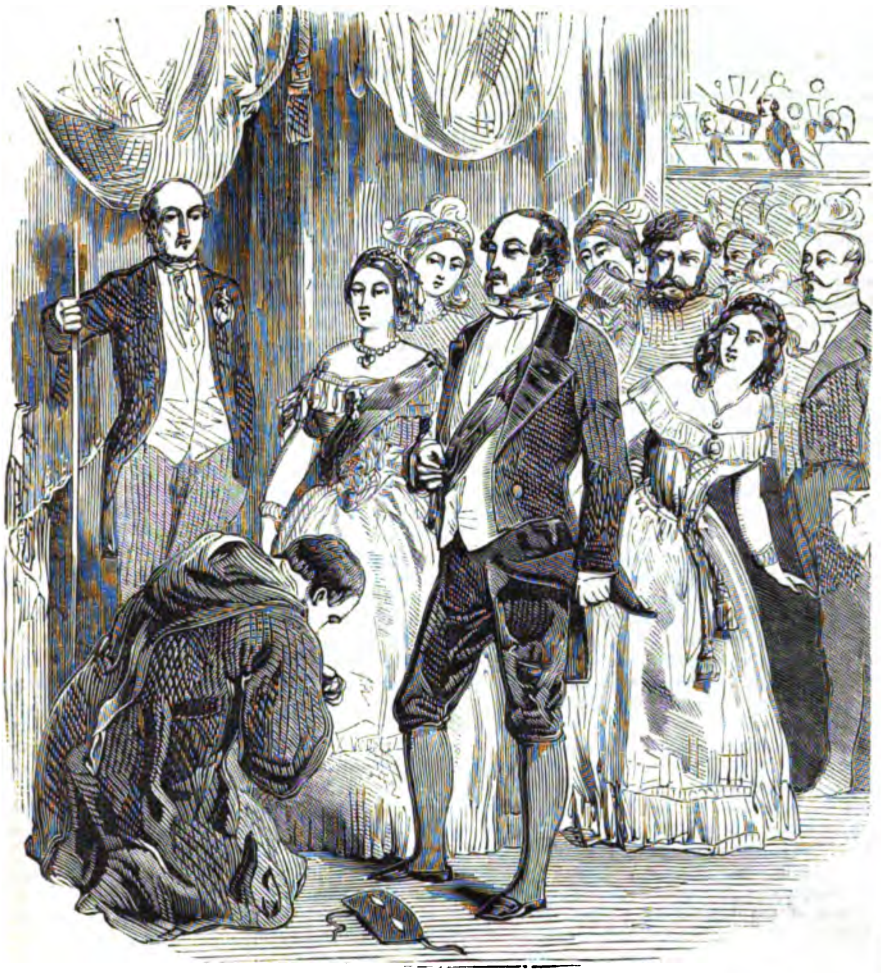
"Admirably, may it please your Royal Highness," responded the butler, with a profound bow.

"I am glad of that," said the Prince, glancing towards the supper-eater. "I am desirous that on such occasions all restraint should be thrown off, and that her Majesty's guests should do ample justice to that which is provided for them."

"I can assure your Royal Highness," responded the butler, "that the most ample justice has been done—especially by one——".

"Ah!" said the Prince, "I am glad of it!"—then glancing at the butler, he thought he beheld something strange in his look: and he observed, "But about this one to whom you specially alluded?"

"May your Royal Highness forgive me if I am really mad," rejoined the butler: "but as I live, there is one guest, wearing a domino, who has eaten three fowls, a pigeon-pie, three parts of a perigord-pie, and cleared six dishes of ham and tongue. He has drunk five bottles of champagne—about three of sherry and port—and not less than a couple of dozen glasses of liqueur."



"Ridiculous!" ejaculated the Prince: and confusion was mingled with sternness in his looks—for he knew not whether to think that the butler had really gone mad, or that he was tipsy and therefore forgetting himself.

"I can assure your Royal Highness," said the unfortunate man, "that I am only dealing with facts. The personage alluded to ate and drank all I have enumerated——And here he is again!"

Yes—sure enough, there was the identical domino gliding into the room: but when just about to seat himself at table, he caught sight of Prince Albert—and appearing to stand aghast for a moment, he made for the door. His Royal Highness was instantaneously seized with the conviction that there was something wrong; and hastening forward, he caught the domino by the arm—not rudely, but with sufficient force to detain him. At that same instant the Queen made her appearance on the spacious landing outside,—accompanied by the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and attended by several gentlemen and ladies of her household. A piteous groan came from the lips of the domino; and he fell upon his knees. The Queen was seized with amazement; and she mechanically took her husband's arm, as if for protection; for the idea of some contemplated but discovered outrage flashed through her mind. The hood fell back from the head of the kneeling culprit; and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha exclaimed in astonishment, "It is Count Frumpenhausen—my Gold Stick!"

Prince Albert at once saw that his illustrious relative's functionary had some tale to tell which would redound little to the credit of either himself or his ducal master; and he was therefore anxious to avoid anything that savoured of exposure in the presence of the company. Hastily making some excuse, he bade Count Frumpenhausen rise from his knees and follow him to a private apartment—a request which the discomfitted Gold Stick obeyed with considerable alacrity; for he felt by no means comfortable with so many eyes fixed wonderingly and scrutinizingly upon him. The Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha likewise accompanied the Prince; and in a few minutes the three were alone together in another apartment. Then Count Frumpenhausen made a clean breast of it and revealed everything. It appeared that a German valet who had attended Prince Albert to this country when he came to espouse the British Queen, was a near relative of the Chevalier Kadger; and when the Grand Duke's retinue were deliberating at Mivart's Hotel how they should indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the Palace, the Chevalier had resolved to seek the counsel and succour of his relative the valet: for he had an idea floating in his ingenious mind that through such assistance himself and his fellow-retainers in the ducal service might at least obtain a substantial supper within the palace-walls. He accordingly sped to his kinsman, who at first expressed his utter inability to do anything for him: but he presently recollected that a guest who had been seized with a sudden indisposition, had departed privately, leaving his domino behind him in an ante-room to which he had retired on first experiencing that sickness. The valet procured the domino, and gave it to the Chevalier Kadger,—strictly enjoining him to use it for himself alone, and by no means to transfer it to any of his comrades. But the Chevalier was resolved to prove faithful in every respect to his fellow-retainers; and on his return to Mivart's, they all sped off on foot together to Buckingham Palace. Being known as the Grand Duke's retainers, they easily obtained admission to an ante-chamber, while the Chevalier Kadger kept the domino compactly folded under his coat. When the ante-chamber was gained, he put on the domino, and had no difficulty in gliding into the saloons where the company were assembled: but he had a keen nose for the refreshments, and speedily making his way to the supper-room, he banqueted to his heart's content. The second wearer of the domino was Count Wronki, the Duke's Lord Steward: the third was the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Duke's Lord Chamberlain: the fourth was General Himmelspinken, the Master of the Horse: the fifth was Herr Humbogh, the ducal Privy Seal; and the sixth, as the reader is aware, was the Count Frumpenhausen, the Gold Stick. But this respectable individual had failed to obtain the supper on account of the most inopportune presence of the Prince at the time in the refreshment-room; while Baron Farthenless, who was to have been the last wearer of the universal domino, was waiting in hungry expectation until his fellow-retainer Frumpenhausen should return to the ante-room to consign the disguising garment to the said Baron's shoulders.

Such was the revelation made to Prince Albert and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Both were exceedingly irate: but Frumpenhausen promised never to offend again; and it was found more convenient to bestow pardon upon him than by expulsion from his ducal master's service, to send him adrift in the world to tell the tale of the domino and the suppers. On their way back to Mivart's, Count Frumpenhausen and Baron Farthenless were exceedingly dejected, miserable, and surly—a state of mind which was by no means mitigated by listening to the complacent terms in which the others eulogised the succulent repast of which they had so luxuriously partaken.

We have said that the Duke of Marchmont was a guest at the palace on this occasion: but he departed long before the *dénouement* of the adventure of the hungry Germans. Indeed, it was scarcely midnight when the Duke stole away from the midst of the brilliant assembly; and entering his carriage, ordered the coachman to drive to the beginning of the street in which Madame Angelique's establishment was situated. His Grace was aware that on this particular evening Christina Ashton was to be carried off; and he was deeply anxious to know the result. It was however no part of the infamous Frenchwoman's plan to take Christina to her own house: she feared that it might be too dangerous—and hence the concealment of her features with a thick veil, to avoid recognition on the part of the young damsel at any future time. She had accordingly made an arrangement with the keeper of another den of infamy, but one which was on a far less splendid scale than her own, to receive Christina—to keep her in close custody—and to have her ruin effected, so that under the imperious pressure of circumstances she might resign herself to a life of pollution, and thereby be prevented from returning to those friends to whom she might tell the tale of her abduction. Such was the abominable conspiracy devised for the accomplishment of Christina's ruin: but the reader has seen how providentially it was frustrated by the collision of the two vehicles.

The Duke of Marchmont, alighting from his carriage, and dismissing it, proceeded to Madame Angelique's house. He found the Frenchwoman in her elegantly-furnished apartment, plunged into a dejection from which not even frequent draughts of wine could serve to arouse her. The Duke at once saw that something was wrong: and he was speedily made acquainted with all that had occurred. He gave vent to bitter imprecations against the mishap; and then on questioning Madame Angelique more closely as to the personal appearance of the individual who had rescued Christina, he recognised Lord Octavian Meredith.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I have known for a long time that Meredith was deeply in love with this girl—and perhaps she will now fall entirely into his hands."

"And if not," responded Madame Angelique, "she will return to the Lady Indora—perhaps she *has* already returned—and perhaps Indora conjectures that it is I who had the girl carried off. I feel my lord as if troubles were thickening around me——"

"And I also!" muttered the Duke with deep concentrated bitterness: then he hastened to add aloud, "But we must do something, my dear madam—we are not to be beaten and baffled in this manner——"

"But what on earth *can* we do?" asked Madame Angelique, with an air of completest bewilderment.

"Yes—what can we do?" said the Duke, almost equally bewildered. "You know that the Lady Indora was already your enemy—you have the certainty that she gave the information against you to the Commissioners of Police—and now this occurrence will only embitter her ten thousand times more virulently against you—aye, ten thousand, thousand times!"

The Duke looked very hard and very significantly at Madame Angelique,—who returned his gaze, but evidently at first with only a vague and uncertain idea of what he meant, until the deepening shade upon his countenance, ominous and scowling, gradually excited within her a notion of what was dwelling in his mind. She flung a half-frightened glance around, as if to assure herself that there were no listeners to their discourse; and then she said in a half-hushed voice, "Explain yourself, my lord—tell me candidly what you mean."

"I mean, Madame Angelique," he responded, likewise in a low subdued tone, "that the Lady Indora must be made away with by some means or another—whether Sagoonah will accomplish the deed or not."

Madame Angelique reflected profoundly for several minutes,—her looks being bent down the while; and then she said, "But how, my lord? Sagoonah vowed that she would attempt nothing more as long as that girl Christina was beneath her roof; and you see how signally the plan for removing her has failed."

The Duke of Marchmont now reflected in his turn: but it appeared that he could think of no new project, and was therefore compelled to fall back upon the old one—namely, of using Sagoonah, through the medium of Madame Angelique, as the instrument of that deed on the accomplishment of which he seemed so bent: for he said, "You must see the ayah again—there is no time to be lost—and it is useless for you to start objections. Sagoonah can alone achieve that which has now become so vitally important to us both. Look you, my dear madam!—as sure as fate, exposure and ruin will overtake you—and if you do not wish to find yourself shortly within the walls of Newgate——"

"Newgate?" echoed the infamous woman, smitten with the direst terror as that dreadful word fell upon her ears: and the look which she fixed upon the equally infamous nobleman was haggard and ghastly.

"Yes—Newgate, Madame Angelique!" repeated the Duke impressively; "and at least two years' imprisonment—if not transportation to one of our horrible penal colonies—for this attempted abduction of the young lady!"

"Good heavens!" murmured the wretched woman, wringing her hands; "to what a pass are things coming! Yes, yes—I must see Sagoonah again—I must ply all my arts and wiles—I must touch her upon those points where I have already found her most sensitive——in a word, I must leave no stone unturned to induce her——your Grace knows what I mean!"

"Yes—you must see her to-morrow," said the nobleman; "and I conjure you to fail not if you value your own safety. I will call on Meredith on some pretext to-morrow morning early—and I shall easily ascertain whether Christina be there, or whether she have gone back——But no!" he exclaimed, as a thought struck him: "to give myself all this trouble were simply ridiculous, inasmuch as you can at once obtain from the ayah precise information on the point."

The Duke and Madame Angelique continued to discuss their vile plans for another half-hour; and when Marchmont took his departure, the Frenchwoman sought her couch. But it was long ere she could compose herself to sleep; and when slumber did at length come upon her eyes, it brought with it a succession of hideous haunting dreams.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

ANOTHER PLOT.

On the following day, as early as nine o'clock in the morning, Madame Angelique, disguised in mean apparel, was loitering in the neighbourhood of the Princess's villa; and in about a quarter of an hour she was discerned by Sagoonah. The ayah—knowing that the domestics were all engaged indoors at the time, and that the faithful Mark was occupied in counting the numerous articles of splendid silver plate in the pantry—repaired to the fence where she was accustomed to hold her colloquies with the Frenchwoman; and the latter hastened towards her.

"So you failed last night," said Sagoonah, in a cold voice of contempt: "you entangled the bird in the snare, and then suffered her to escape."

"Did she return home speedily?" asked Madame Angelique, with feverish impatience.

"Yes—what else could she do? or what otherwise do you suppose that she would have done?"

"No matter," rejoined Madame Angelique quickly. "Does the Lady Indora suspect——"

"I listened," rejoined Sagoonah, "to the entire tale that Miss Ashton told her ladyship—I remained outside the door—I lost not a word—and I am convinced that her ladyship cannot do otherwise than suspect that *you* were the person into whose hands Christina fell."

"Think you that her ladyship will take proceedings against me?" asked the Frenchwoman.

"I know not," was Sagoonah's cold response: "I cannot always read the Lady Indora's thoughts."

"You see, Sagoonah," resumed Madame Angelique, "that I have done my best to carry off Christina—and I have failed. You must recall the vow you made to the effect that you will attempt nothing more so long as she remains beneath her ladyship's roof. Doubtless you have still the same motive——yes, you *must* have—your feeling of rancour against your mistress is still the same—and now you have an additional interest in removing her as speedily as possible from your path."

"An additional interest?" said Sagoonah, with a slight tincture of curiosity in her accents: and then she coldly added, "I do not understand you."

"I can speedily explain myself," rejoined Madame Angelique; "and I think I can show you that your interests are now mixed up with my own."

A smile of superb contempt curled the thin vermilion lips of the ayah; and she said, as if haughtily spurning the bare idea, "My interests in any way common with your own?"

"I will soon make it apparent," answered Madame Angelique. "Listen attentively. The Lady Indora has already begun to wreak her vengeance upon me—it matters not how—but I have the positive proof that it is so:"—and she shuddered as she thought of Mr. Shadbolt. "This being the case, there can be no doubt that the Lady Indora will go on persecuting me; and even if she be desirous to remain in the background, she can induce Miss Ashton to take legal proceedings of a very serious character against me."

"And in what does all this concern me?" asked Sagoonah, with scornful impatience. "Because I have consented to listen to you on former occasions—to aid your projects—and even to appear to become the instrument for carrying out your views, think you that I will any more mix myself up with the concerns of one whose artifices are so clumsily arranged that they invariably fail? Look at your poltroon Duke who feared to seize upon the golden opportunity—look at your own scheme of last night, which the merest accident—a collision of vehicles—served to baffle! No—I will have naught more to do with you or your concerns, until you show yourself worthy of my complicity by removing this girl Ashton from within the walls of the villa."

"I will speedily convince you, Sagoonah," resumed Madame Angelique, who had listened with the utmost impatience to that long speech which was coldly but disdainfully uttered,—"I will speedily convince you that your interests are more intimately wrapped up in mine than you appear to imagine. What if the Lady Indora continues her persecutions against me—what if in the course of a few days, when the legal machinery is set in motion, she hands me over to the grasp of justice ——think you that in order to let myself down as lightly as possible, I would not tell all?"

"Ah! now I understand you," exclaimed Sagoonah, her large luminous eyes flashing forth living fires. "You would betray me to my mistress? And if you did so," continued the Hindoo woman, bending a look of mingled scorn and hate upon Madame Angelique, "think you that I would not be avenged? Yes!—into the depths of whatsoever dungeon the arm of the law might consign you to, would I penetrate—and my dagger should drink your heart's blood!"

"For which deed you would hang upon a gibbet," replied Madame Angelique. "But it is useless—worse than useless—for you and me to stand here threatening each other. At all events we now understand one another; and I have shown you that your own interests are more intimately connected with mine than you had previously imagined."

Sagoonah reflected for a few moments; and then she said in a low voice full of concentrated rage—but a rage which was altogether subdued so far as the expression of her countenance was concerned,—"Yes! if you, to help yourself, in the case supposed, were to prove thus treacherous, it would go ill with me. Now, woman, what mean you?" asked Sagoonah sternly. "You have sought me with some fixed plan—you have something settled in your mind. Speak quickly—what is it?"

"The Lady Indora must die!" answered Madame Angelique, in a low, deep, emphatic voice.

"And you mean to add that she must die by my hand?" said Sagoonah. "But it cannot be! Enough has already transpired to the knowledge of Christina Ashton to make her fix the deed upon me if it were accomplished."

"What if I were to place in your hand a subtle poison?" said Madame Angelique: and she looked up with a sinister aspect into the countenance of the ayah, who bent over the palings.

"No—nothing, nothing, so long as the girl Ashton is beneath that roof," replied Sagoonah firmly. "She sleeps lightly—she has already more than once detected me in wandering about the premises by night—she has seen me enter the chamber of my mistress—and she impressively told me that the silent hours of darkness are those which Murder chooses wherein to do its dreadful work."

"Ah! she has said that?" muttered Madame Angelique, with a look of mingled terror and vexation.

"Yes—she has said that," responded Sagoonah impressively: "and think you therefore that if a suspicious deed were done by night within those walls, the Christian girl would not at once lay her hand upon my shoulder, and say, 'It is you who did it!' No, woman!" continued Sagoonah, "my hand shall not wield the weapon, nor pour the drop of poison between the lips of my mistress, so long as Christina Ashton is *there*, and in a position to surrender me up to justice. If we were in mine own country it would be different; and I should defy her. For there the deed might be done under such circumstances as would completely avert suspicion from myself—aye, even though in my former conduct there had been anything suspicious! Yes—were we in mine own native Hindostan," proceeded the ayah, now speaking as if musing with herself rather than actually addressing her observations to Madame Angelique, "this hand of mine would convey to the couch of my mistress some reptile of deadly venom, whose fangs would instil the quick poison into her veins, and whose form would be found coiled up in the morning upon the bosom of its victim!"

"And you would do this if you were in India?" said Madame Angelique, whose imagination was horribly prolific in all vile expedients: "you would do this, Sagoonah?"

"Aye, I would do it," was the response: "because the presence of the reptile would tell its own tale—and no one would ask whether it had been conveyed by a human hand to the couch to which it brought death—or whether it had insidiously glided in and nestled there of its own accord. But in this country of yours you have no such venomous things that may be caught in any patch of grass, found amidst the foliage of any tree, or snatched up from the midst of any parterre of flowers."

"But if I told you, Sagoonah," said Madame Angelique, a devilish idea, which had already taken inception in her mind, expanding quickly there,—"if I told you where in this city of ours there are kept the deadliest specimens of your own reptile races to gratify the curiosity of visitors —would you have the courage——But, no! it is ridiculous! You were only boasting because you believed that there were none of those venomous creatures here: you would not grasp the puff-adder or the cobra di capello in that hand of your's?"

A slight smile of scorn appeared upon the lips of the Hindoo woman; and she said, "This hand of mine has often and often clutched the deadliest cobra; and its writhing form has coiled itself round my naked arm. To snatch the reptile deftly by the neck—to hold it in such a way that it could not bend its head so as to plunge its fangs into my flesh—to amuse myself with gazing upon its expanded hood, and in marking the rage that vibrated in its small bright eyes—then with a lightning suddenness to fling it back again into the basket of the serpent-charmer—this was a freak, woman, which I have often and often performed."

"And you would perform it again—or at least a portion of it?" said Madame Angelique, with a sort of dreadful shuddering joy, as she once more looked up eagerly into the ayah's countenance.

"Aye—that would I," answered Sagoonah. "But it is useless thus to speak to one who is incredulous——Ah! now that I bethink me, this very afternoon will the Lady Indora take Christina Ashton to visit some Gardens in this metropolis of yours, where there are lions, and tigers, and other wild beasts pent up in cages; and it is promised that I shall accompany those ladies. If you were there to see, you would soon satisfy yourself whether the eye of the tiger can infuse terror into my heart. I who have seen the fierce animal loose and at large in our Indian jungles, crouching in readiness to spring upon the elephant which bore me in the castle on its back——"

"And you are going to those Gardens this afternoon?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, almost wild with delight: "the coincidence is indeed strange, because I had an idea——"

"What mean you?" asked Sagoonah.

"I mean," responded the infamous Frenchwoman, "that in those very Gardens to which you are going—if thither you indeed go——"

"I tell you that just now," interrupted Sagoonah impatiently,—"only a minute before I issued forth from the dwelling to join you here, I overheard her ladyship inform Christina of the little plan she meditated to afford her a variety of scene, and thereby cheer her spirits somewhat after the incidents of the past night; and Miss Ashton, who gives a ready assent to everything her benefactress proposes, expressed her thanks. All this was said in my presence; and the Lady Indora added with a smile, that I should accompany them,—for that inasmuch as I had seen the wildest animals free amidst the jungles of my own native land, and full of menacing mischief,—I should now behold them pent up behind iron bars, and reduced to subjection, if not to tameness, by the dominant power of man."

"Ah, then you will go to those Gardens!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But did not your mistress tell you that there you will likewise behold specimens of the deadliest reptiles which belong to your own native Hindostan?"

"No," answered Sagoonah. "Perhaps her ladyship is ignorant thereof."

"And yet it is so," rejoined Madame Angelique. "A special house is devoted in those Gardens to the keeping of the reptiles; and there will you see them in glass cases. If you have the opportunity, Sagoonah, would you dash your hand through the frontage of one of those cases—seize upon the reptile within—and bear it away with you by some suitable means——say, for instance, a thick leathern bag that you might have concealed about your person?"

"I would do it," answered Sagoonah. "But is it possible that such opportunity could present itself?"

"I have often visited those Gardens," replied Madame Angelique, "and have been alone for half-an-hour at a time in the reptile-house."

"You love, then, to gaze upon those venomous creatures?" said Sagoonah; and even under the coldness of her tone and look there was a certain satire perceptible, as if she meant to imply that there was a sympathy between the nature of the Frenchwoman and that of the snakes which she loved to contemplate.

"Yes—I have frequently stood to gaze upon those reptiles," answered Madame Angelique, not choosing to notice that half-covert irony which pervaded Sagoonah's speech. "I tell you that you will find the opportunity if you have the courage to avail yourself of it. Those who may enter the reptile-house afterwards, will believe that the glass has been broken by accident, and that the reptile has glided forth of its own accord. There will be consternation;—of that no matter. *You* will know the secret—but you need not proclaim it. The cobra—if it did really thus escape, as it will be supposed—must go somewhere: and why not find its way to the villa of your mistress? and if to the villa, why not to her own bed? Who, then, shall dare tax you with the deed? Not even Christina Ashton would for an instant entertain the suspicion that the deed was your own."

Sagoonah gazed for a few moments in a sort of astonishment, not altogether unblended with admiration, upon the woman who despite the failure of her former artifices, had a devilish ingenuity sufficient for the concoction of such a scheme as this. Then the ayah mused for a few instants more; and at length she said, "Yes—if the opportunity serve, I will do it. And now begone!"

Madame Angelique sped away, her heart fiercely yet shudderingly elate with the horrible triumph which she had just achieved in respect to again bending Sagoonah to her purpose.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton, attended by Sagoonah, alighted from the carriage at the entrance of the Zoological Gardens in the Regent's Park. We have already said that her Highness, the King of Inderabad's daughter, frequently—indeed, almost daily—rode out in her equipage: but this was the first time that she had visited any public institution or scene of recreation. She had however for some time longed to behold those animals which she had often seen wild in her native country, here in complete subjection to the power of man; and she now availed herself of an opportunity when, for the kindest reasons, she sought to cheer Christina's spirits and treat her to a change from that monotony of existence which she feared that her young friend experienced at the villa at Bayswater. She knew nothing of Lord Octavian Meredith's attachment to Christina, nor of the painful incidents connected therewith: she had therefore no reason to hesitate about bringing our heroine into the vicinage of that nobleman's dwelling,—for she knew that it was situated in the Regent's Park. On the other hand, when the proposal to visit the Gardens was made to Christina, she had not dared hint that she would rather not proceed into a neighbourhood where she stood a chance of falling in with Lord Octavian; because to have raised any objection of the kind, would as a matter of course have necessitated the revelation of those circumstances which maiden modesty and virgin bashfulness naturally prompted her to conceal.

There were very few visitors at the Zoological Gardens on the occasion when the Princess Indora and Christina, attended by Sagoonah, thus visited them. Her Highness wore an oriental garb—but the very plainest which belonged to her wardrobe; and she had carefully dispensed with much ornament, so as to avoid as much as possible attracting notice. The ayah was clad in her habitual white costume: Christina's toilet displayed an elegant neatness. Three such beings could not possibly enter a public place without striking the notice of those who were also there, few though they were. All three being characterised by a remarkable beauty—that of Indora so magnificent, that of Sagoonah so darkly splendid, and that of our heroine so exquisitely interesting in its classic perfection—two of them moreover, wearing peculiar costumes—it was impossible that they could escape special attention. Yet the persons who were there, pressed not rudely upon them—but moved as it were at a respectful distance, until when it was whispered by one of the officials that the principal object of interest was an eastern lady of rank and fortune; and then this announcement was taken as a hint that the little party wished to be as free from observation as possible during their visit to the Gardens.

At first Sagoonah kept tolerably close to her mistress and Christina: but gradually she increased the interval between herself and them. This she was easily enabled to do without exciting any particular attention on their part: for it appeared by no means strange that she should linger a little behind them to contemplate some particular animal or bird belonging to a clime far remote and different from her own, and which specimens of natural history she had consequently never seen before. We will not dwell upon unnecessary details: suffice it to observe that after having inspected the various objects which presented themselves to their view in one portion of the Gardens, they passed through the tunnel and entered upon the other division. Facing them was a placard indicating a particular direction—and with these words, "To the Reptiles."

Sagoonah understood them; and a thrill vibrated throughout her entire frame. She felt for something that was concealed under her long white dress; and having assured herself that it was all safe there, she looked for a moment as if she had already achieved some grand triumph: then suddenly relapsing into her wonted demeanour, she followed the Princess and our heroine into the reptile-house. There, in cases of different sizes, and each having a frontage of thick plate glass, were all the most terrible specimens of the serpent species. In one a huge python, sixteen or seventeen feet long, and as thick in the largest part of its form as a man's thigh, was creeping lazily out of a tank of water: in another an immense boa-constrictor was coiled round the branch of a tree placed there for his comfort and accommodation: more serpents of the same species were to be seen in other cages,—some winding their slimy lengths over the gravel strown on the floors—others coiled up on thick blankets, or protruding their heads from amidst the folds of horse-cloths, or licking the glass frontages of their dens with their forked tongues. The venomous reptiles were to be seen in much smaller cases on the opposite side of the room. There was the rattlesnake, with a host of little ones coiling, writhing, and wriggling about their parent—a horrible and loathsome brood! There was the puff-adder, with its hideous bloated head, the most transient glance at which was calculated to send a shudder through the frame of the beholder who knew that its bite was death. But not less venomous was the dark cobra, with its head reared up from amidst its coils, its hood expanded, and its throat of a shell-like appearance and whiteness. It was upon this object that Sagoonah's eyes at once riveted themselves; and if any one had observed her at the time, it would have seemed as if those luminous black orbs of her's reflected the reptile-fire which gleamed from the pupils of the hooded snake. But there was no one in the room except herself, her mistress, and Christina; and quickly averting her eyes from the object of her vivid interest, she affected to bestow her attention on the more monstrous serpents.

"To me, my dear Christina," said the Princess, "the aspect of the greater portion of these species of reptiles is more or less familiar; and if you had lived a few years in my native country, you would have become sufficiently accustomed to the same spectacles as to be able to look upon them now without so strange a shudder as that which I perceive has just swept through your form."

"I pray your ladyship to pardon me," said our heroine,—"do not deem me foolishly weak, if I assure you that I can remain here no longer to look upon these reptiles."

"Come then, Christina—we will seek some other and more agreeable objects of interest. Sagoonah," added the Princess, addressing the ayah in their own native tongue, "you can follow at your leisure if you have any particular wish to remain here awhile and contemplate these creatures, most of which must however be sufficiently familiar to you."

"I will follow almost immediately, my lady," responded Sagoonah. "Monsters of this particular species"—and she looked towards the python—"I have never seen before."

The Princess Indora hurried Christina from the snake-room: and as they passed forth, a glow of triumph and satisfaction again thrilled through Sagoonah's form. She watched them until they disappeared from her view by suddenly diverging from the straight path leading from the snake-house along the back of the canal: then she hastened to the door—she issued forth a few paces—her eyes were rapidly swept around—no one was nigh—and she hurried back into the reptile-room.

A sinister fire burnt in her large dark eyes as she approached the case containing the deadly cobra. He darted his head somewhat forward, as if with an inveterate malignity longing to spring at her, but yet with the instinctive knowledge that there was a barrier of glass between them and that he would only sustain a hurt by dashing himself ineffectually against that transparent frontage. The calm intrepidity of ten thousand amazons was concentrated in the soul of Sagoonah then! She glanced at the arrangements of the cases: she saw that the glass fronts were made to slide up and down, but that they were fastened by small brass padlocks, one of which was fixed on the top of every case. She tried the padlock above the case in which the cobra lay; and as if Satan himself had purposely lent his aid to further her foul design, the padlock yielded to her hand. The keeper had either omitted to lock it—or else had so slovenly done his work as not to see that the semi-circular bolt had not been thrust in far enough to meet the lock itself. But whichever it were, the padlock was now removed by Sagoonah's hand; and again did her eyes flash forth the fire of triumph.

Once more she sped to the entrance of the snake-house and swept her looks around. Still the coast was altogether clear; and she retraced her way towards the deadly cobra's den. Then from beneath the folds of her garments she drew forth a small bag of the thickest and strongest leather,—a bag that was about large enough to contain a fowl or small rabbit. She had so skilfully arranged a piece of whipcord to pass along the top or opening, that it could be closed and drawn tight in the twinkling of an eye—just as a lady's reticule is made to shut. This bag she opened to a suitable width, and placed it in readiness to receive the reptile. Then without the slightest fear—without even so much as the faintest sensation of a curdling of the blood—she lifted the glass with her left hand,—having her right in readiness to use at the moment that should seem advisable. The reptile appeared to watch for a few instants the ascending glass, as if it were something to which it was totally unaccustomed: for be it well understood that the glasses of those cases were never raised while the reptiles were in them, and only when they had been driven or lifted into an adjoining empty case by a stout wire passed through a small hole at the top. Thus the cobra now seemed to follow with its cold vibrating eyes the ascending glass, as if it were something that struck it with a vague terror: then it closed its hood—turned its head round—and began to glide to the back part of the case. Not more quickly could the reptile itself have darted at Sagoonah than was her right hand thrust into the case; and ere her eye could wink she had clutched the serpent by the neck, but so close to its head that it could not possibly turn its mouth sufficiently so as to touch her finger even with its tongue. Its tail was instantaneously coiled round Sagoonah's dark but admirably modelled arm: but in another moment the head of the reptile was forced into the opening of the bag. A partial drawing of the string constricted the opening to just the limit of the reptile's dimensions, so that it could not turn its head to bite as it gradually glided through her loosening grasp; and just as the point of its tail slipped through her palm, the string was drawn completely tight. Sagoonah then lowered the glass to within about an inch of the bottom of the case,—thus giving it the appearance as if the serpent itself by its own efforts had raised it thus far; and she sped to rejoin her mistress and Christina,—the leathern bag with its fearful contents, being concealed under her garments. She had not been altogether separated from the Princess and our heroine more than five minutes before she thus overtook them; and it was with a demeanour as calm and collected as if nothing at all extraordinary had taken place.

Our young heroine had been shocked and sickened by the contemplation of the reptiles; she felt faint—she looked very pale—and the Princess Indora accordingly resolved to take her home at once. They were in the close vicinage of the revolving-gate which affords egress exactly opposite the principal entrance: the carriage was in readiness—and thus within two or three minutes after Sagoonah had rejoined them, they were seated in the equipage once more.

A quarter of an hour had probably elapsed from the departure of the Princess, when the principal keeper of the snake-house, on entering the room, was smitten with horror on observing that the glass front of the cobra's case was raised, and that the cobra itself had disappeared. The cold perspiration burst out of the man's forehead; and he shuddered with a convulsing terror as the dreadful thought struck him that from some corner the deadly serpent might spring upon him. But the room is so arranged that a few moments' careful scrutiny is sufficient for the eye to penetrate into every nook; and the keeper, regaining somewhat of his self-possession, was thus enabled to satisfy himself that the cobra was not within that room. He was a prudent man—he did not wish to excite a consternation amongst the visitors in the grounds: he closed the glass of the case, and sped away to the superintending authority of the Gardens. This individual was speedily on the spot: there was evidence to prove that the padlock had been neglected by the under-keeper; and the natural surmise was that the reptile, by dint of its own muscular action, had succeeded in raising the glass. The circumstance was whispered to some of the most trustworthy of the men employed on the grounds; and a search was instituted for the missing snake: but it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that this search terminated unsuccessfully. The matter was consequently hushed up: and to those who inquired what had become of the cobra, the response was given that it had died.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE COBRA.

The Princess, Christina, and Sagoonah returned to the villa; and by the time of their arrival, our heroine's indisposition had passed off. She expressed a hope that her Highness would not accuse her of any foolish affectation; and Indora hastened to reassure her on the point in the most friendly terms.

The hours passed on—it was close upon ten o'clock in the evening—and in a short time the Princess would retire to her couch. Sagoonah had the principal charge of her mistress's bed-chamber; and she knew perfectly well that the English maid-servants would not enter it after she herself had performed the last offices there. She likewise felt tolerably certain that the cobra when once placed in the bed, would be too well satisfied with its warm comfortable quarters to leave them speedily. At all events when the door should be closed, Sagoonah knew full well that the snake could not possibly get out; and therefore even if it should leave the bed and coil itself up in any other part of the room, the ayah calculated upon the hideous certainty that the Princess must become the victim of its fangs. She was all the more confident in this respect from certain little circumstances which we may as well mention. Indora's dressing-room joined the bed-chamber: there was, as a matter of course, a door of communication between them; but the dressing-room was likewise entered by a door from the passage. It was by this latter door that the Princess was wont to seek her dressing-room of an evening; and Sagoonah's presence was never required for any length of time in aiding the Princess with her night-toilet. Thus, by keeping the door of communication closed, Sagoonah knew that the snake would be confined to the bed-chamber, and that she herself would incur no danger, while in the dressing-room, of becoming its victim instead of her mistress. Such were the cold-blooded, fiendish, diabolical calculations which the vile Hindoo woman weighed in her mind while pondering the fearful deed of iniquity that she contemplated.

It was close upon ten o'clock when Sagoonah had completed the wonted arrangements in the dressing-room and the bed-chamber. She was careful to place in the dressing-room every article that her mistress might need in order that there should be no chance of requiring anything to be fetched from the bed-chamber. The arrangements being completed, Sagoonah ascended to her own room—unlocked her box—and stood carefully back for a moment to convince herself that the deadly reptile had not by any means escaped from the leathern bag. Nor had it. Then Sagoonah acquired the further certainty that the strings of the bag were tight; and concealing it beneath the folds of her white drapery, she descended to Indora's chamber. Approaching the bed she drew down the clothes, and with exceeding caution she relaxed the strings of the bag somewhat,—keeping her eyes riveted with scrutinising intentness upon the opening thus made. In about a minute the hideous reptile began to protrude its head; and just as the commencement of its neck was visible, Sagoonah grasped it with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand—so quickly, so nicely, and with such admirable expertness, that the snake had not time to plunge its fangs into her flesh. She now drew it completely out of the bag: again was her arm quickly encircled by its dark slimy folds: but she speedily disengaged the coils from that arm—and with one dexterous effort threw the serpent into the middle of the bed. It instantaneously sprang up to dart at her: but she commenced a low yet quick half-humming, half-singing strain. The reptile was charmed—and its head gradually sank down amidst its coils. Then she covered it up with the bed-clothes, and retreated towards the door of the dressing-room—but never once averting her eyes from the couch, lest the deadly serpent should be gliding after her. It did not make its appearance: she entered the dressing-room; and the door closed between herself and the chamber in which she had left the venomous cobra. Ascending to her own room, she deposited the leathern bag in her trunk, which she relocked; and then proceeded to join her fellow-domestics, with an air as settled and composed as that which she had worn when overtaking her mistress and Christina in the Zoological Gardens after her final issue from the snake-house.

Meanwhile the Princess Indora and our heroine were seated together in the elegantly-furnished drawing-room; and the time-piece on the mantel proclaimed with its silver tongue the hour of ten. Scarcely had it finished striking, when the sounds of a vehicle stopping at the garden-gate were heard; and these were immediately followed by the loud ringing of that gate-bell. The summons was answered; and the Princess Indora expressed to Christina her wonder who could possibly be coming at that hour of the night. In a minute or two Sagoonah made her appearance; and having performed the wonted low salutation, she stood in the attitude of a slave in the presence of the Princess, waiting to be questioned.

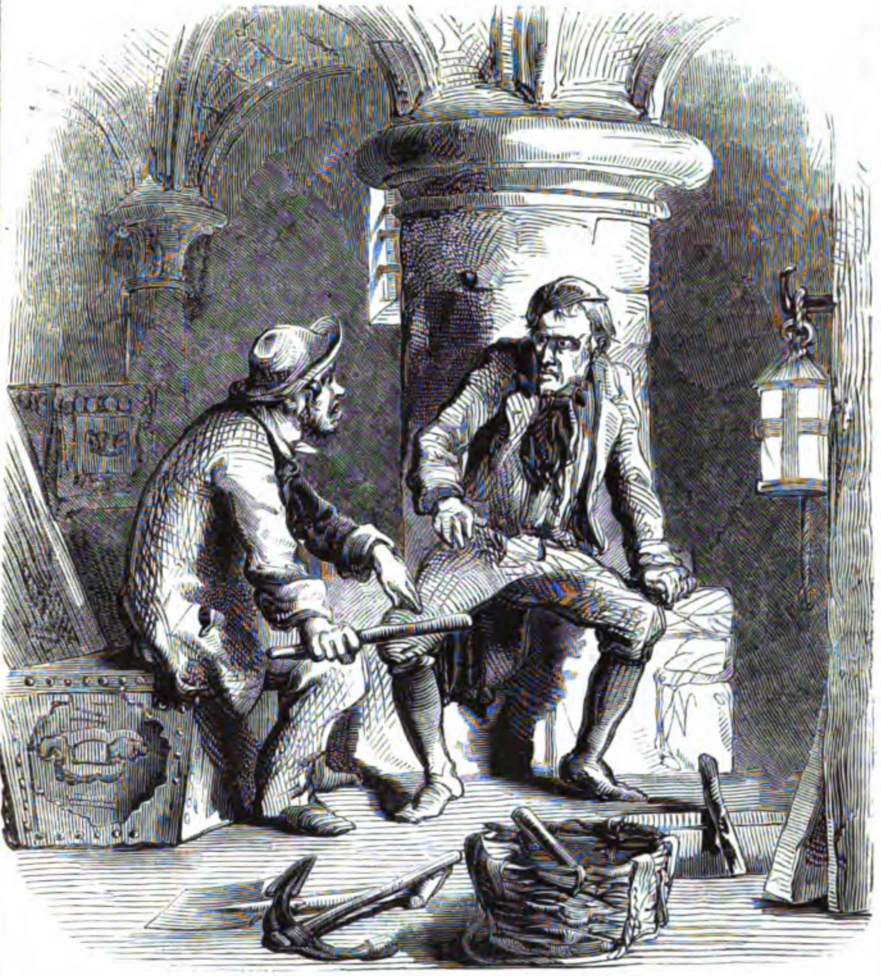
"What is it, Sagoonah?" asked Indora, who, since Christina had been with her, was accustomed to speak to her ayah in the English language when in the young lady's presence—not merely because she was unwilling to seem to have any secrets with our heroine, but likewise because she wished to enable Sagoonah to have as much practice as possible in that tongue in which Christina was her tutoress.

"May it please your ladyship," answered the ayah, "two messengers from your royal father humbly solicit an immediate audience."

"Messengers from my dear father?" said Indora, clasping her hands with a gush of filial emotions. "Let them at once be admitted."

Sagoonah bowed and withdrew. Christina rose from her seat, and was likewise about to retire from motives of delicacy—when the Princess retained her, saying, "Sit down, my dear friend. These messengers can have no secret to communicate which you may not hear; and even if they had, they would converse with me in a language which you cannot understand."

Our heroine accordingly resumed her seat; and in a few moments Sagoonah introduced the two messengers from the King of Inderabad. The ayah retired; and the messengers prostrated themselves at the feet of her who was heiress to the crown of their royal master. Both were of the dark Hindoo colour; and both were handsomely dressed in their native oriental garb—the chief material of their raiment being a dark velvet embroidered and laced with gold. One was a fine tall man, of portly form and commanding presence: his age might have been about fifty—and he was the senior in years as well as in rank. His companion was short of stature—slightly made and thin—with an angular profile, and restless eyes of exceeding sharpness. He was scarcely forty years of age; and Christina perceived that his garb, though handsome, was in several respects



less rich than that of his comrade. That they were both devotedly attached to the royal family whom they served, might be judged—first of all, from the fact of their being chosen as the confidential messengers of the King to his daughter—and secondly, from the look of joy and satisfaction which overspread their countenances the moment they were ushered into the presence of Indora.

But those looks, so expressive of the natural ebullitions of their faithful hearts, almost instantaneously subsided into an air of profoundest respect, as they sank down upon their knees at the feet of the princess. For a moment tears started into Indora's eyes as she beheld those personages whose presence so vividly reminded her of the palatial and paternal home which she had abandoned in order to follow the object of her devoted love to a strange and far-off clime: but quickly conquering her emotions—or at least preventing herself from being led into any farther betrayal of them—she addressed the two messengers. She spoke in her native tongue; and though Christina understood it not, yet she comprehended sufficient from the tones and looks of her Highness to enable her to judge that she was speaking most kindly to them, and that she was thanking them for the fidelity and devotion they had displayed. She gave them her hand to kiss: each touched it respectfully with his lips, at the same time bowing profoundly once more. The Princess then made a sign for them to rise from their kneeling posture; and as they obeyed, the senior emissary produced a letter which he tendered to her Highness. She took it with a trembling hand; and fresh tears sprang into her eyes as she beheld the superscription in the well known writing of her father. She motioned the messengers to seat themselves; and this they did upon an ottoman on the opposite side of the apartment. Hastily wiping away her tears, Indora perused the letter: it was a somewhat lengthy one; and its contents engaged her for upwards of ten minutes.

During this interval Christina occasionally glanced towards the two emissaries, whose peculiar costume she naturally had a certain curiosity to examine,—when it gradually occurred to her that the younger messenger was exhibiting a certain feeling of uneasiness. At first he, as well as his comrade, had remained seated with statue-like immovability: but by degrees the younger one began to look around—to give slight starts—to seem even as if he were shuddering and trembling—to sniff the air with his nostrils—and then to fix his naturally piercing eyes upon some corner of the apartment with an additional and increasing keenness. It was evident also to Christina that he strove to surmount whatsoever feeling thus moved him, but that it was gradually growing stronger than himself. Even his companion, the senior messenger, at length perceived it, and bent a reproving look upon his comrade: then the latter became motionless and rigid for another minute or two—but at the expiration thereof he again yielded to that sense of nervous uneasiness which though so visible, was yet utterly unaccountable to our wondering heroine.

The Princess Indora finished the perusal of the letter; and for a few minutes she remained absorbed in the reflections which a communication from her father might naturally be supposed to engender in her mind. Then she addressed a few words to the senior emissary; and he responded at some considerable length, as if he were giving explanations in answer to a question put.

"These faithful emissaries," said the Princess, addressing herself to Christina, "come, as you heard Sagoonah announce, from my royal father. They left Inderabad three months back; and they have travelled by the overland route to this country. From Bombay they were accompanied by an English interpreter, whose services they there procured; and thus they have experienced no difficulty in the prosecution of their journey. They only reached London this evening; and they beg me to excuse them for having come hither at so late an hour—but they judged that I should be only too well satisfied to receive the earliest tidings from my beloved father. He is well; but he misses me greatly. His letter is full of kindness—and he urges me to return to my native land with the least possible delay. I have been expecting some such summons as this——and yet the purpose which brought me to England, is not as yet accomplished! It cannot however be long," continued Indora, in a musing strain rather than actually addressing herself to Christina;—"no, it cannot be long ere my object shall be worked out. Heaven has already aided in placing me on the right track! The time, therefore, I feel confident is not far remote when I shall be enabled to obey my father's summons; and it was this idea, Christina, which made me tell you yesterday that if I am soon compelled by circumstances to leave England, you should not find yourself unprovided for."

Our heroine expressed her gratitude with a look fervently bent upon her high-born friend; and then the Princess resumed the conversation with the senior emissary. But by this time the uneasiness of the junior one had risen into a sore trouble and agitation: he gathered up his legs completely under him on the ottoman—his slender wiry form appeared to be convulsed with spasmodic writhings—his eyes vibrated with a visible terror—he sniffed the air—the perspiration stood upon his dark bronzed brow. Indora now observed the condition of the man; and stopping short in some remark which she was addressing to his companion, she gazed upon him with bewildered astonishment. He threw himself at her feet—looked shudderingly around—and then ejaculated something which had the instantaneous effect of making the Princess Indora herself start, as if abruptly smitten with the infection of the man's own terror. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession, she smiled, and addressed him in words the tones of which were evidently fraught with encouragement, as Christina herself could not fail to comprehend.

"You will be amused, my dear friend," said the Princess, addressing herself in English to our heroine, "when I explain to you the reason of all this——the more so too, that the coincidence is strange, after we ourselves have only this very day visited a certain place. Compose yourself, Christina—because you know it is as impossible as I have just been endeavouring to persuade this messenger that it is——but he expresses his belief—nay, even his conviction, that there is a serpent of deadly nature within these walls."

Christina had recoiled with sickness and loathing from the contemplation of the reptiles in the Zoological Gardens; and it was no affected sensation on her part. But she was not a silly, frivolous, weak-minded girl to yield herself to terrors when her own sound and steady judgment gave her every reason to believe that there was no actual foundation for them. She therefore at once said, "Yes, it is impossible, my lady: for we have no venomous reptiles in this country—except the viper and adder, whose bites are seldom if ever fatal; and at all events, I have never read nor heard of one instance of their introducing themselves into houses."

Meanwhile the trembling messenger had risen from his kneeling posture; and slowly but keenly were his looks being plunged into every corner of the room. The senior messenger had started up in consternation when his comrade had ejaculatingly announced his conviction of the presence of a serpent within those walls: but he was somewhat cheered and soothed by the assurances which the Princess had given, although he still looked doubtingly upon his Hindoo companion.

"It is at least strange," said the Princess, speaking more hastily than before to Christina: "for this individual" (alluding to the junior messenger) "was originally one of the most celebrated snake-charmers in all India, until for a particular service rendered my royal father took him into his household and assigned him a confidential post. It is the peculiar instinct, if I may use the term, of some of these snake-charmers that they can actually tell when they are in the vicinage of that most deadly of reptiles, the cobra di capello. Perhaps it is an exhalation from their slimy forms which impregnates the atmosphere, and which though imperceptible to those unacquainted with the peculiarities of that species of serpent, is nevertheless sufficient to strike the extreme sensitiveness of the astute snake-charmers."

"But as for a cobra being within these walls, my lady," said Christina, "it is simply impossible!"—and yet as she spoke she shuddered at the bare idea.

"I will question him again," observed the Princess. "But look at him!—assuredly this is no groundless nor mere panic terror under which he is labouring!"

She addressed the Hindoo in a few words: his answer was given with rapid utterance and vehement gesticulation, as if while in the expression of a positive conviction he were only held back by a sense of the respect due to a superior from upbraiding her Highness for doubting him.

"He persists in his assertion," said Indora, again turning to our heroine. "Do not alarm yourself—but something must be done. I know this man well—he would not attempt to deceive me——Besides, look at him again, and judge for yourself!"

Christina indeed had not taken her eyes off the Hindoo: his agitation was painfully increasing—and she was convinced that it was most real. He appeared to be writhing as if in actual torture—shuddering to the innermost confines of his being: his teeth chattered as if with the cold—the perspiration stood in large drops upon his bronzed forehead. The Princess addressed him again: he spoke vehemently, but still with the completest respectfulness, in reply;—and he extended his hands as if he asked for something.

"He persists in declaring that there *is* a cobra in the house," said the Princess, again speaking to Christina; and he asks for some musical instrument, which, if he once possessed it, would dispel all his terror and make him feel that he suddenly becomes the master of the serpent with no fear of falling its victim."

"Mark has a flageolet," hastily suggested Christina: "your ladyship knows that he is fond of shutting himself up in his own room and playing it——"

"An excellent thought of your's, my sweet young friend," responded Indora; "and as certain orders must be issued, it is absolutely necessary to summon one of the servants at any risk."

"At any risk, my lady?" said Christina, turning pale. "Then you yourself begin to believe——"

"I know not what to think," interrupted Indora. "On the one hand it seems impossible—but on the other it strikes me that the matter is not to be neglected. The longer I look at that man, the more I am staggered——But we are wasting time, Christina! Have the goodness to ring the bell twice: it is the special summons for Mark."

The bell was rung accordingly; and it was promptly answered: for Mark was in the hall conversing with the English interpreter who had accompanied the two messengers to the villa. Mark, as the reader will remember, had himself been in India; and he was therefore well pleased to fall in with a fellow-countryman who had just arrived from that orient clime, and who could tell him all the news. Mark's presence in the hall had been productive of one beneficial effect—although he little suspected it: for it prevented the ayah from stealing up-stairs to listen on the landing at what was taking place in the drawing-room—a proceeding in which the wily Hindoo woman was very likely to have indulged, were it not that she dreaded the idea of exciting Mark's suspicion. She had already said in the servants' room that her work was all done up-stairs—no bell summoned her—she had no excuse for ascending those stairs—and they were so situated with respect to the entrance-hall and the landing above, that if she had gone up and loitered on the latter, she would have stood every chance of being detected by Mark who was stationed in the former.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. Mark answered the summons given by the double ringing of the drawing-room bell; and the Princess hastily explained to him the strange but serious apprehension entertained by the Hindoo messenger. The faithful domestic was himself somewhat staggered—though it was certainly singular for an Englishman to be told that there was a venomous reptile of India within the walls of a dwelling on the outskirt of London: but still he *was* staggered, because he beheld the excessive agitation of the Hindoo, and his experiences of Indian life were sufficient to convince him that it was a real terror under which the emissary was labouring. Besides, Mark was prudent—and he knew full well that as an apprehension was created, it would be better to have it dispelled as soon as possible, no matter whether it should be proved groundless or else justified by the result.

"Say not a word to the other domestics," observed the Princess hurriedly, though not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind: "it will be useless to terrify them——"

"But Sagoonah and Tippoo, my lady, will hear the music," suggested Mark; "and they will know what it means."

"True!" ejaculated the Princess: then, after a moment's reflection, she added, "Go you first and fetch the flageolet—then return to the servants' hall—see that all the domestics are there—lock the door—put the key in your pocket—and tell them what you will. At all events you will prevent them from rushing frantically about the house, or escaping into the garden——But go, good Mark—and for heaven's sake look well on the staircase and elsewhere—for if the horrible suspicion be indeed correct——But go, Mark—I am needlessly wasting time!"

The faithful intendant of Indora's household quitted the room; and immediately he had disappeared, the junior messenger who now seemed to have become more calm, said something to the Princess.

"He still perseveres in declaring that there is a cobra within the walls of this villa," said the Princess to Christina: "but since the door has been opened and shut twice during the last few minutes, he says that his instinctive susceptibility tells him that the reptile is not here, in this room—but in some other—and he thinks overhead."

"Good heavens, the bed-chambers!" ejaculated Christina, who at each successive stage of these singular proceedings was more deeply catching the infection of terror notwithstanding the natural strength of her mind.

"Do not be alarmed," replied the Princess, now completely cool and collected: "it may be all an error—it may arise from something exhaling a peculiar odour which strikes upon this man's exquisitely keen sensitiveness: but if on the other hand, there be really a cobra within these walls, rest assured that by the aid of the music it will be discovered and destroyed."

"But if it should suddenly spring on one of these messengers?" said Christina, with a frightened look of inquiry.

"There is no chance when once the piping begins——But here is Mark—and now the mystery will soon be solved!"

The intendant appeared with the flageolet, which he had been to fetch from the servants' hall; and having handed it to the junior emissary, he hastened off again, to do Indora's bidding in respect to locking himself in with the other servants, in the room where they habitually sate. In that room the English interpreter was now seated: there also were Sagoonah and the Indian man-servant Tippoo—the groom—and two English females (for the Princess had taken an additional maid into her service since Christina became an inmate of the villa). The coachman did not sleep at the house, and had already gone to his own home. On returning to that room, Mark deliberately locked the door and consigned the key to his pocket. He was the last man in the world—much too sedate and serious—to play a practical joke; and therefore his fellow-servants at once comprehended that there was something strange and unusual in progress—while perhaps Sagoonah, having a guilty conscience, might be smitten with the suspicion that the proceeding related to her own infernal project: but if so, she outwardly betrayed nothing.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Mark?" inquired the groom, but in that tone of respect which he was always accustomed to adopt towards his mistress's intendant.

"You need not alarm yourselves," responded Mark: "it is merely a wise precaution. Every one knows we have a certain species of venomous reptile in this country—and there is some little reason to suppose that one has got into the house."

"Well, Mr. Mark," exclaimed the groom, scarcely able to prevent himself from bursting out into a laugh, "and if there should be such a thing as a viper in the house, it is not by locking ourselves in this room that we shall get it out again. I would just as soon tackle it as I did the large rat that I killed in the stable yesterday morning."

"There happens to be a snake-charmer from India here this evening," replied Mark; "and perhaps her ladyship has a mind to see whether his skill extends to English reptiles as well as to Asiatic ones. But hark! he has commenced! Those are the sounds of my flageolet!"

The two English maid-servants were very much alarmed at the idea of a viper being in the house: the groom now laughed outright—Mark continued serious—and the English interpreter knew not exactly what to think. Tippoo, the Indian man-servant, appeared to be suddenly seized with terror as the sounds of the peculiar melody which the junior messenger drew from the flageolet, reached the servants' hall: for Tippoo instantaneously recognised the particular strains used in charming the cobra in his own native land. As for Sagoonah, she saw at once that the presence of the reptile was suspected—she was at no loss to conjecture how the instincts of the *quondam* snake-charmer must have led to the discovery—she perceived that her project was ruined—and she inwardly cursed the inauspicious arrival of the messengers on this particular night. But so far as her own personal safety was concerned, she had no dread: she felt convinced that it could not be for an instant suspected that she had brought away the cobra from the Gardens, or that she had placed it in the couch of a mistress whom she was believed to love with so sincere and inflexible a devotion.

We must now return to the drawing-room, which Mark had so recently quitted, leaving the junior messenger in possession of the flageolet. This individual made a sign to his superior, who at once drew his keen sharp sword from its sheath, and was thus in readiness to act as circumstances might direct. The junior emissary,—whose last remnant of terror had altogether vanished, and who now seemed to be inspired with a confidence as great as his recent alarm—began to play upon the flageolet in a peculiar manner. At the same time he turned himself slowly round, as if moving on a pivot where he was standing; and his searching eyes thus gradually embraced the whole circuit of the apartment. In a few minutes he desisted, and said something to the Princess.

"His first impression is fully confirmed," remarked her Highness to Christina: "he is convinced that the cobra is *not* in this room—for if so, the reptile would speedily have come dancing forth from its lurking-place. You and I will remain here while they pursue their search elsewhere."

"And your ladyship does now really believe," said Christina, shuddering, "that there is such a venomous reptile about these premises?"

"If I were to give you the assurance," rejoined Indora, "that there is nothing of the kind to be apprehended in my estimation, I should be speaking untruthfully. And yet, on the other hand, I am at a loss to comprehend how it can possibly be. But we shall soon be relieved from uncertainty and suspense."

Indora now gave the emissaries, in her own native language, some information as to the other apartments; and they quitted the drawing-room together,—the junior one being careful to recommence his play upon the flageolet the instant the door was opened. They issued forth, closing the door behind them; and the peculiar music which the Hindoo made upon the instrument, continued to reach the ears of Indora and Christina as the emissaries passed across the landing to another room. The Princess sate calm and self-possessed: but Christina could not help experiencing strange sensations creeping over her. What if by any accident the Hindoo's instinct had so far failed him, and the music had so far lost its wonted charm, that the serpent—if a serpent indeed there were—was actually in that very room? what if presently it should come gliding forth from beneath some piece of furniture, with that stealthy insidiousness which characterises the reptile species alone? For aught Christina knew to the contrary, death might be close at hand: the agent of destruction might be noiselessly insinuating itself towards herself or her much-loved benefactress.

"Do not be alarmed, my dear friend," said the Princess, penetrating what was thus passing in the mind of our heroine: "you may rest assured that the instinct of the snake-charmer cannot fail him—especially one who in his time was so famous as this Hindoo emissary. You would be astonished to behold those snake-charmers in my own native land. They not merely play with the deadly cobra: they irritate and enrage the reptile—but all the while being careful that the peculiar music is sustained; for if the flow of the melody which constitutes the charm for the serpent and the talisman of the charmer's safety, were to cease, that instant were death! There are European travellers and writers who have endeavoured to prove that the poisonous fangs have been torn from the mouth of the cobra before the snake-charmer will venture to play with it; and that therefore the feat resolves itself into a mere piece of jugglery which could be as well performed with the most innocuous of reptiles. But those writers err: for cases have come within mine own experience—or rather within my own knowledge—where men have been bitten by the reptiles with which they were playing a little time before; and they have died of those bites. For instance, a few years ago, in my father's sovereign city of Inderabad, an itinerant snake-charmer earned the applause of crowds in every street by the introduction of some novelties into the wonted routine of the performance adopted by men of his class. He retired to rest at night in a hut on the outskirt of the city,—his purse being well filled with coin; and his basket of reptiles—the source of his gains—safely secured, as he thought. In the morning the man was found dead; and a slight puncture on the cheek—or rather two small punctures, close together, and not larger than if they had been formed by the point of a lancet—indicated the cause of his death. One of the cobras had contrived to escape from the basket; and as there was no charming music at the time to fascinate its ear, it plunged its fangs into the flesh of its master. It was found coiled up in a corner of the hut, gorged with some small animal that it had swallowed; and being inert after its meal, was easily destroyed."

While the Princess was yet speaking, the sounds of the two emissaries' footsteps were heard overhead: they were evidently passing along the passage in which the principal bed-chambers were situated. The music had never ceased playing from the instant they quitted the drawing-room: and though Christina was somewhat encouraged by the assurance which the Princess had ere now given her, she notwithstanding still experienced the cold creeping sensation as if a prolonged shudder were continuously creeping over her.

"Now they are in my chamber," said the Princess, as the footsteps were heard in the apartment precisely over the drawing-room. "Hark! the music plays louder—it grows more rapid! I know its meaning well! Yes, Christina—that man's instinct did not deceive him!—there is assuredly a deadly reptile in the house——Ah! and it is in my own room!"

Our heroine gave a half-stifled shriek of affright as she threw herself into the arms of the Princess,—weeping and sobbing upon that lady's bosom, and mumuring in a broken voice, "Just heaven! if it should prove so, Oh! what would have become of your ladyship, had not these messengers arrived! It is providence that has sent them!"

Indora strained her young friend to her breast, and imprinted a kiss upon her pure polished forehead: then a sudden ejaculation burst from Indora, as the music suddenly ceased in the chamber overhead.

"What is it?" asked Christina: and her breath was suspended with a suspense most poignantly painful.

"It is all over!" responded the Princess: "the reptile is discovered and is destroyed. Hark to the joyous tones of those men's voices! But hither they come."

And it was so. The two emissaries were descending the stairs with much more rapid steps than when they had mounted them a few minutes back. The music was not renewed: it was therefore evident that all danger was past and gone. The door opened; and the senior messenger hastened into the room—where falling upon one knee at Indora's feet, he opened a towel which he carried in his hands, and displayed a cobra cut into three pieces. Those fragments of the reptile were yet writhing convulsively: but all real life was out of them—it was mere spasmodic action which the sections thus displayed—and the snake was incapable of mischief. But Christina averted her looks with ineffable loathing, as well as with a cold shuddering terror. The Princess herself flung but one glance on the remains of the deadly reptile; and in obedience to a sign from her, the messenger covered them up again with the towel. He spoke in answer to some question which the Princess put; and then she bade the junior emissary likewise approach. He also knelt; and the Princess, drawing from her fingers two rings of immense value, bestowed them respectively upon the two individuals who had thus saved her from destruction.

"Yes, my dear Christina," she said, again addressing herself in English to our heroine, and speaking in a voice of profound solemnity,—"Heaven has indeed interposed most signally in my favour. Tranquillise your feelings—exercise a command over yourself—while I tell you what I have just learnt from the lips of these men. It appears that the moment they entered my chamber, the instinct of the younger one convinced him in a moment that the reptile was *there*. Again I say compose yourself, Christina—although I confess that the bare idea makes even myself shudder. Yes—for forth from my bed—from beneath the clothes—from the very place where in another hour I should have lain myself down—glided the hideous reptile. Then was it that the music played more loudly and more rapidly, as we heard it; and the cobra began to dance upon the bedding according to the wont of its species when thus fascinated by a peculiar medody. But its very moments were numbered: for the keen weapon of the senior messenger, glancing like a lightning-flash, smote the reptile with unerring aim; and it lay severed, as you have just seen it, upon the bed which might under other circumstances have proved a bed of death to me!"

Christina was so overcome by her varied feelings,—thankfulness for Indora's providential escape, astonishment at the miraculous manner in which it had been accomplished, and horror at the thought of so deadly a reptile having been in the house,—that she nearly fainted. The Princess sustained her young friend in her arms, embracing her affectionately: Christina exerted a strong effort to regain her self-possession; and a flood of tears gave her effectual relief.

Mark was now summoned; and the result of the investigation was made known to him—an announcement which he received with feelings not far different from those which inspired Christina Ashton.

"I cannot understand, my lady," he said, "how such a reptile could be here: for the veriest child knows that there are none indigenous to this country. It must have escaped from the Zoological Gardens, or else from some itinerant menagerie: but heaven be thanked for its discovery and destruction, ere dread mischief was wrought by its venomous fangs!"

"I need not remind you, Mark," observed Indora, "how it suits my purpose to retain a strict *incognita* here; and how desirous I am therefore to avoid attracting any particular notice on the part of the public. It is therefore my pleasure that this occurrence be kept strictly secret; and you will enjoin the English domestics not to speak of it to their acquaintances, nor to make it a subject of gossip amongst the tradesmen with whom we deal. Mention this likewise to the interpreter who accompanies the messengers from my royal father."

Mark bowed and withdrew,—taking the towel and its loathsome contents away with him. We need hardly say that with the exception of Sagoonah, every one in the servants' hall was smitten with horror and astonishment on hearing what Mark had to relate, and on beholding the proofs of his story. But the wily ayah so well played her own part, that she seemed to be as much affected as the rest—or even more so. Mark and the groom went forth together to bury the fragments of the cobra in the garden; while Sagoonah, hastening up-stairs, glided into the drawing-room—and falling upon her knees at Indora's feet, took the hand of her Highness and pressed it to her lips, as if in congratulation at the escape of a well-beloved mistress. And Indora, who supposed herself to be thus well beloved, caressingly smoothed down the long dark hair of her slave,—at the same time thanking her for what she naturally conceived to be a proof of her affectionate devotion.

The messengers and the interpreter took their departure from the villa: but it was not until a late hour on this memorable night that the inmates retired to rest; for alike in the drawing-room and in the servants' hall there was much to converse upon.

On the following day Madame Angelique reappeared in that neighbourhood: for under all the circumstances which are known to the reader, she was deeply and painfully anxious to ascertain what progress Sagoonah was making in the diabolical enterprise she had undertaken,—whether it was as yet carried out,—and if not, when it would be. The ayah—more or less suspecting that the infamous woman would thus seek her, and wanting to be so sought—was on the look-out. She approached the fence where their colloquies were wont to be held; and Madame Angelique flew thither. At first she thought, by the cold, rigid, statue-like air of the darkly beautiful Hindoo, that the deed was already accomplished: in fact, so confident was she that such would be the announcement she was on the point of hearing, that she experienced an inward feeling of savage joy. Sagoonah seemed to penetrate what was passing in her mind: for she said in that voice of monotonous coldness which she so often was wont to adopt, "You are exulting without a cause: the Lady Indora yet lives—and is likely to live long."

"Sagoonah—my dear Sagoonah—these words from your lips!" exclaimed Madame Angelique, in mingled disappointment and dismay.

"Yes—those words from my lips," responded the ayah, coldly as before. "Last night the terrible project which you yourself suggested, was put in train—and it failed. I tell you that the Lady Indora possesses a charmed life," continued Sagoonah, with a sudden emphasis half solemn and half of passionate vehemence: "and heaven itself manifests its power on her behalf. To meditate further mischief against her, would be to fight against the deities themselves! I will not again dare such an unholy strife! Ask me not for details——I will give none!"

"But you must—you must!" exclaimed Madame Angelique; "for yesterday I visited the Gardens after you had left—I took care to inform myself that your party had been and was gone—I looked in the reptile-house—and, Sagoonah, the deadly cobra was missing!"

"And that cobra was taken away by my hand," rejoined Sagoonah, a terrific brightness suddenly flaming up in her large black eyes. "Think you therefore that the hand which dared grasp the reptile, trembled to deposit it in the couch of her to ensure whose death my own was dared? No!—I did all that your infernal wickedness suggested, and that my own fearful courage was enabled to accomplish. But heaven intervened wondrously—miraculously!—and the dead reptile—dread now no longer—is buried in this garden. I tell you, woman," added Sagoonah fiercely, "that those who serve the cause of Hell cannot possibly prevail against the blest of Heaven:—and the Lady Indora is thus blest! Begone—tempt me no more! All your arts and wiles—your cajoleries and your instigations—are vain and fruitless. Never more will I be led by them—never more will I bend to them! Begone, woman—and beware how you seek this place again!"

There was a wild eloquence in Sagoonah's language which corresponded effectually and impressively with her aspect, as she thus spoke. Her eyes burnt with a supernal lustre: they glowed in the magnificence of their brightness—their splendour was effulgent, but terrible and overpowering. Her nostrils dilated—her lips wreathed like those of a pythoness when enunciating prophecies with an inspiring frenzy. Her tall form was drawn up to its full height,—the swelling bosom upheaved beneath the white draperies that only partially concealed those contours as well rounded as if belonging to a statue of bronze;—and altogether the appearance of that Hindoo woman struck terror and dismay into the heart of Madame Angelique.

"Begone, I repeat!" exclaimed Sagoonah once more: and the milliner shrank cowering back from the fierce lightnings of the ayah's eyes.

Then Sagoonah turned slowly away from the fence, and gave no heed to the Frenchwoman's passionate entreaties that she would stop and listen to her. Madame Angelique waited for a few minutes in the last desperate hope that Sagoonah would yet come back: but she did not—and was presently lost amidst the dense foliage of the evergreens. Then the milliner was compelled to betake herself away from the neighbourhood of the villa,—so bewildered with what had occurred, and by the terrors which oppressed her guilty soul, that she knew not what course next to adopt: and again, as on a former occasion, she was pursued, surrounded, and hemmed in, by the sinister and unaccountable influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE VAULT IN THE CHURCH.

The scene now changes to one of those beautiful little villages which are to be found in Westmoreland,—where the hills protect the dwellings from the cold winds of winter, and where lakes and rivulets reflect in the summer-time the trees that stand upon their banks. The village to which we would now particularly direct the attention of our readers, was situated in a valley: it was more than half embowered by large trees, whose giant arms, covered with verdure, stretched over the cottages which formed the chief portion of that little assemblage of habitations. It was intersected by a stream, which, after turning the wheel of a water-mill, passed under a rudely constructed wooden bridge—but all in appropriate keeping with the picturesque simplicity of the scene; and thence the rivulet pursued its course, embracing with its sinuosity two sides of the churchyard, and flowing on through the meadows until its serpentine form was lost in the distance. To this village it suits our purpose to give a fictitious name; and we will therefore, with the reader's permission, denominate it Woodbridge.

The church—standing in the midst of its sacred ground crowded with tombstones, many of which were old enough, and showed the remains of quaint and uncouth sculpturing—the others indicating the resting-places of the more recently deceased—was about a quarter of a mile apart from the village itself; and, as we have already said, the churchyard on two sides stretched down to the bank of the river, which there made an abrupt curve. Close by was the parsonage—a small old-fashioned house, built of bricks of a deep dingy red—with a little wooden portico, supported by two thin pillars; and there was a tolerably large garden attached to the dwelling. Not very far off was a small cottage—or rather hut; and here dwelt an old man named Carnabie, but who was more familiarly known in the village by his Christian name of Jonathan. He was between sixty and seventy; and for thirty years had filled the united offices of clerk, grave-digger, and bell-ringer in that parish. These situations his father had held before him—and very likely his grandsire also, for aught that we can tell to the contrary. During his parent's lifetime, he used to assist in digging the graves and in opening the vaults; and thus from his very childhood was he brought up to be accustomed to find himself in contact with the ceremonies, the memorials, and the relics of the dead. Perhaps it was this circumstance which had so far influenced his disposition as to render him somewhat cynical and morosely reserved: he had never married—he associated but little with the villagers—and it was a rare occurrence indeed for him to take a seat of an evening in the parlour of the *Green Dragon*. To his face he was invariably addressed as "Mr. Carnabie;" but behind his back he was spoken of as "Old Jonathan." It was reported that his habits were miserly, and that when a light was seen glimmering, at a late hour, through the window of his isolated cottage, he was counting over his hoarded coins. Others however said that he was fond of reading; and this rumour appeared to receive its justification from the fact that he was a constant borrower of books from the parson's library. That he was a strange and eccentric character, however, there could be no doubt; and that his feelings were somewhat morbid or peculiar, was equally certain, from the fact that he would just as soon dig a grave during the night as in the day-time, and that he was often known to visit the church during the hours when other people slept. The natural inference was that he was utterly exempt from superstitious fears, and likewise that as long habit had rendered him familiar with everything that concerned the dead, so he had a sort of hankering to be incessantly amidst their memorials, their resting-places, and their relics. In personal appearance he was sedate, and had even a venerable look, notwithstanding the cynical eccentricity bordering upon moroseness which marked his disposition and characterised his habits. He was tall and somewhat thin—exceedingly upright, as if years sate lightly upon him: he was still strong and active. Such was Mr. Jonathan Carnabie, clerk and sexton of the parish church of Woodbridge.

It was about twelve o'clock at night—the very same night on which the incidents of the cobra occurred at the Princess Indora's villa—that a man, rudely apparelled, and carrying a stick, which in reference to its dimensions might better he denominated a bludgeon, came wandering through the meadows which the river intersected after its sinuous course left the churchyard. It was a bright and beautiful night—so bright indeed that print of a moderate size might have been read: but all along the river's banks there was a mist—very thin, however, and of fleecy whiteness. The man dragged himself on with the painfulness of one who was either in ill-health or else had travelled a considerable distance. Yet he did not support himself on his stick: he for the most part kept it under his arm—or else every now and then took and flourished it with the vexation of a naturally savage disposition, or perhaps with the desire of meeting some one on whom, for predatory motives, it might be worth while to exercise his skill in wielding that formidable bludgeon. Perhaps, if we penetrate into the man's thoughts, and follow their course somewhat, we may be enabled to ascertain the circumstances in which he is placed—and the readers will discover, if they have not already suspected, who he is.

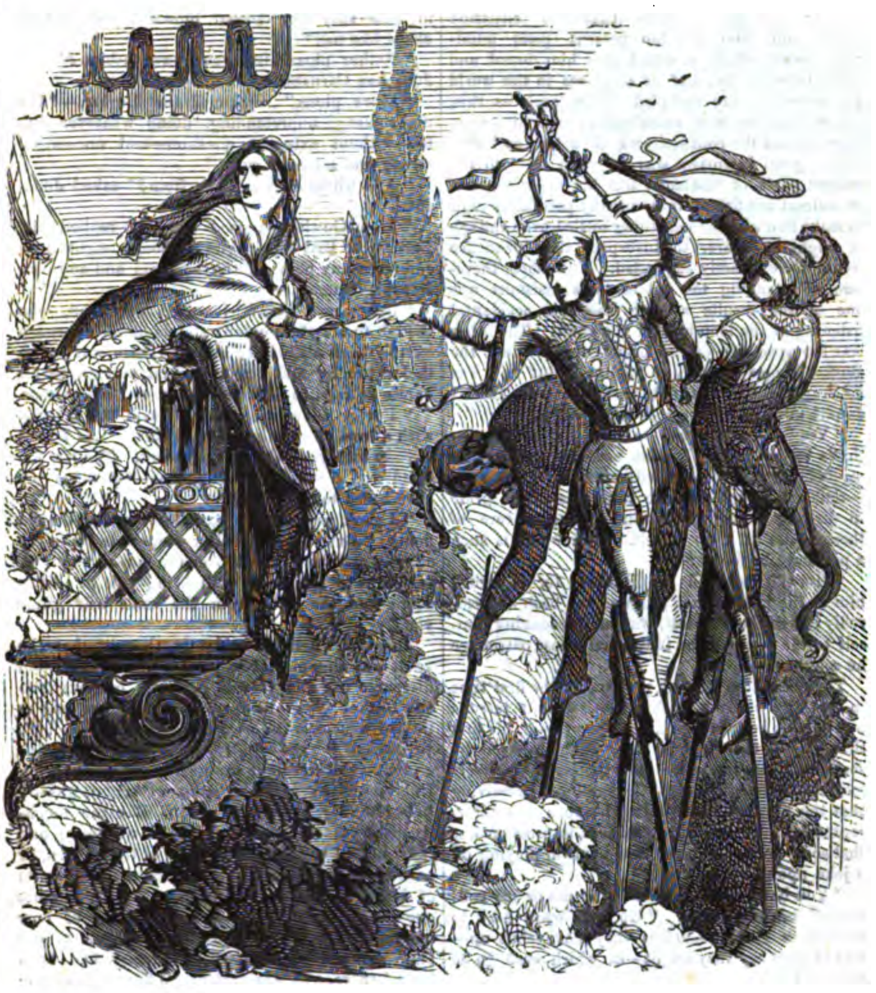
"Well, I'm blest if ever a respectable genelman found his-self in such a precious mess as I am in now—nothink but the glory of having escaped out of the stone jug and knocked the turnkey on the head, to cheer me up a bit. Here four days has gone since that there brilliant exploit on my part; and I've tramped a matter of a hundred mile, sneaking along like a half-starved dog—afeard every moment that some feller will tap me on the shoulder, saying, 'Now, then, Barney, you're wanted!'—But arter all, it's better to be free to wander through these here fields, even though I must presently stretch myself under a hedge or creep into a barn, with the chance of being took up as a wagrant and sent to the mill as a rogue and waggabone,—than to stop in Liverpool gaol with the certainty of dancing upon nothink. Well, this is a consolation: but I shouldn't mind having summut more consoling in the shape of a good hot supper and a jorum of grog. Four whole days and nights—living on charity—just what I could pick up at lonely cottages—and then only getting summut to eat cos why my looks isn't the pleasantest in the world—and when women is by theirselves, and their husbands is out, they don't like such a face as mine to be poked in upon them. Well, arter all, a ugly face has its adwantages: for when a chap is in distress, he gets in this way more than would be gived him if his looks was 'ansome, meek, and amiable. But I never see such a part of the country as this here is! Four whole days without meeting a single traveller that was worth stopping, except that jolly stout farmer which had his pistols and made me run for my life. It's a blackguard shame that the people in these parts don't travel as other Christians does, with their gold chains and their purses—or else that if they do, they carries pistols."

Here, to relieve his injured feelings, as he thus thought with ineffable disgust over his supposed wrongs, Mr. Barnes the Burker gave a terrific flourish with his huge bludgeon, as if he was aiming a desperate blow at the people of Lancashire and Westmoreland who would not come forth to be plundered. As he was pursuing his way, he came within sight of the village—the walls of some of the cottages gleaming white amidst the embowering trees. But there was no satisfaction nor cheering hope in the prospect for him. Without a penny in his pocket—conscious of his forbidding looks—dressed in sordid apparel, he was not insane enough to suppose that the door of any inn or private dwelling in that village would be opened to afford him a welcome reception. And then, too, he felt assured that a hue and cry had been raised the moment his escape was discovered—that advertisements had been sent to all the provincial newspapers—that handbills had most likely been circulated—and that therefore his position was anything but a safe and secure one. The reader cannot fail to have understood that, on being captured in London in the manner described in an earlier chapter, he had as a matter of course been transferred to that town which was the scene of the murder for which he would have to stand his trial along with Mrs. Webber, had he not escaped from the gaol. He was a veritable outcast in every sense and meaning of the term—penniless, houseless, foodless, and a wanderer.

Yet he drew nearer to the village with the hope that something might transpire to relieve his necessities—or else to afford him a barn, shed, or out-house where he could stretch his wearied limbs for a few hours ere pursuing his journey again. The path which he was threading through the fields, brought him to the gate of the churchyard; and as he sate to rest himself there for a few minutes, he fancied that he beheld a light glimmering through a small window, or loop-hole, at the very bottom of the wall of the church. The Burker was little prone to superstitious fears; and his curiosity was therefore excited. He entered the churchyard—he advanced towards the little window whence, as he had fancied, the light was really glimmering. This window was more than half-way below the actual level of the churchyard: but the earth had been cut away in a sloping manner towards it, so as to admit the air, if not the light of day, into the place to which it belonged. The Burker, passing amongst the tombstones, and trampling recklessly upon the graves, advanced nearer towards the little window—stooped down—and peeped in. There was an iron grating, but no glass to the window—if a window it could therefore be thus denominated; and the Burker could obtain a full view of the interior of the vault—for a vault it was. A short but massive pillar rose in the centre, supporting the arched ceiling, which was the floor of the church: several coffins were there—an immense lantern hung to an iron nail fixed in the wall—and an old man in a very plain garb was seated on a block of stone at the foot of the pillar. On the ground were several implements such as might have been used in raising the stone which covered the vault, and which therefore belonged to the pavement of the church. The glare of the lantern, which completely filled the vault, prevented Jonathan Carnabie—for he the old man was—from observing that the argentine beams of the night's splendour were now intercepted at the loophole by the form of an observer. He sate upon that stone, gazing slowly around on the coffins which were ranged against the sides of the vault; and though merely musing with himself, he nevertheless said loud enough to be overheard by the Burker, "Well, there's room sufficient to be sure: but then the question is, which is its most appropriate place?"

The coffins upon which the old man thus slowly bent his gaze, exhibited the proofs that they had been at very different periods consigned to that last resting-place of the shrouded dead whom they enclosed. There were coffins that were so dilapidated and broken it seemed as if the slightest touch would send them crumbling into dust—others which were somewhat better preserved—others again which evidently belonged to a still more recent period—and two or three which seemed as if it were only within the last few years that they had taken their places in the midst of that family receptacle.

"Well, it is strange," continued the old man in his audible musings, "that I can't at once hit upon the place where this new-comer shall be deposited to-morrow. I suppose my intellect is not as clear as it used to be; and I know that it takes me twice



as long to dig a grave in the yard as it did a matter of twenty years back. But then I'm twenty years older!—and perhaps I ought to be thinking of who will dig my own grave? Whoever he is, it won't be the same as the one who is to act as clerk: for when I am dead and gone, the offices are to be separated. *That* I know for a fact. I shall look out for an assistant: the people die fast in this village, small as it is: but then there's an astonishing number of old people here!' It would really seem as if they had lived on with an understanding that when they all came to a certain date they should die off as fast as possible. Yes—I will have an assistant."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Jonathan Carnabie slowly and deliberately drew forth from his pocket a tolerably large flask; and it was also well filled, as the Burker could judge by the way in which the old man put it to his lips. The draught he took was a moderate one: and then he consigned the flask back again to his pocket.

"Yes—an assistant!" resumed Jonathan in his audible musings: "it is all very fine to talk about an assistant—but where is one to be found? If I cast my eye over all the stout young chaps at Woodbridge and round about, I cannot think of one that will in any way do. None of them like old Jonathan, as I know the rascals call me—— Heaven forgive me for using such a strong term as *rascals* in a church! But about the assistant—— where is he to be found?"

The old man paused, and took another small draught from his flask, as if he thought it would sharpen his intellects and help on his reflections. But now there were two circumstances which had acquired a peculiar interest for Mr. Barnes, whose countenance was cooling itself against the iron bar of the window. The first was that the old sexton wanted an assistant; and the Burker saw at a glance that the situation would suit him for the present most admirably, inasmuch as it would give him bread and a bed to sleep in; and of all places in the world an out-of-the-way secluded village such as this, was perhaps the best calculated to yield him a refuge against the consequences of a hue and cry. His original intention was to push on into the wildest parts of Scotland: but his experiences of an outcast condition were already painful enough to make him wish for something settled, even though it might be nearer to Liverpool than prudence would have exactly suggested. The hope, therefore, of becoming the old sexton's assistant was one of the results arising from his accidental listening at the loop-hole of the vault. The other was the spectacle of the brandy-flask, which the Burker longed to apply to his lips. But how was he to introduce himself to the old man? Hark! Jonathan Carnabie resumes his musings.

"Yes—I am resolved to have an assistant—that's settled! But I must have one that will do my bidding in all things without being questioned—that will be tutored into taking as much pride in digging a neat grave and having a care of these vaults as I do myself. Now where is such a person to be found?"

"Here!" answered the Burker: for it struck him at the instant that this was the best, as assuredly it was the shortest, way of introducing himself to the notice of the individual whose patronage he sought.

The old sexton started, perhaps for the first time in his life smitten with a superstitious terror: but quickly recovering his self-possession, his first thought was that he must have been deceived by some unusual sound. He nevertheless instinctively looked towards the loop-hole; and on perceiving that the light of the shining heavens was intercepted by a human form, his next impression was that some belated villager was bent on playing off a joke upon him.

"You have nothing to do with me or my concerns," said Jonathan. "Go your ways back to the *Green Dragon*—unless they have shut up—and in decency they ought—in which case go to your bed."

"I don't happen to have never an acquaintance with the *Green Dragon*," responded the Burker; "and as for seeking the bed I last slept in—— But no matter!" he interrupted himself, as his thoughts had wandered back to the narrow iron bedstead, the hard mattress, and the horsecloth coverlid in the gaol whence he had escaped. "I'm not a native of this here willage, though as respectable for a poor man as any that is."

"How came you here?" asked Jonathan bluntly.

"I'm out of work," responded the Burker—as indeed he was out of the work which constituted his ordinary occupation before his capture. "I'm on the tramp—I was passing through the churchyard—I saw the light—but not being afeard of ghostesses, I peeped in."

"Not afraid, eh?" said old Jonathan, to whom this was at once a recommendation on the Burker's behalf.

"More afeard of the living than the dead," replied the Burker: "cos why there's a many people in this world as goes about like roaring lions seeking how they may dewour innocent and unwary chaps like me."

"Rather pious after your own fashion?" said Jonathan Carnabie.

"Wery pious," responded the Burker,—"but unassuming, unpretending, doing whatever I'm bid without axing a question—and uncommon strong and active at work."

"And where do you come from?" asked Jonathan.

"From Gowler—a good way off," replied Mr. Barnes; so that this vague response might have embraced any point of the compass and any conceivable distance.

"But where from?" inquired Jonathan, who though to a certain extent simple-minded through having dwelt all his life in that village, was nevertheless precise and circumstantial enough in his habits to require definite replies to his questions.

"I'm a Lincolnshire man," said the Burker, with a tone of uncommon frankness. "As I have already told you, I'm out of work. The last job I did was for Farmer Nuggans——perhaps you have heerd talk of him?"

"I can't say that I have," responded the old man. "But you had better step round into the church, and we will talk over the matter here. A few steps to the right will bring you to a little door; and the light from the vault will guide you."

Jonathan Carnabie evidently thought that the vault was the most comfortable place to sit and discourse in; and it was perfectly indifferent to the Burker where he deposited himself so long as he had a chance of carrying out his aims. He proceeded to the little door—he entered the church—and the light from the vault, glimmering feebly, seemed to be a dim, uncertain, ghostly halo hanging about the dead. But the moonbeams were shining through the windows; and they helped to subdue the light of the lantern, or to render it more sickly. They fell upon the pews of dark wood—upon the pulpit standing against one of the thick pillars—and upon three or four monuments with the sculptured effigies of the long defunct warriors whose remains had been buried there. It was evidently a very old church: —in former times there had been a castle in the neighbourhood; and hence the monuments to which we have referred. The silence which prevailed until broken by the Burker's heavy stamping feet, would have struck solemnly to the soul of any other man, and would have induced him to tread lightly: but he was totally unsusceptible of such impressions—and he went tramping along the aisle, indifferent to the mournful echoes which his nailed boots raised, and which might have been taken for the moanings of the spirits of the departed as they died away under the groined roofs at the farther extremity.

On reaching the mouth of the vault, Barney the Burker descended into it by a flight of stone steps; and he very deliberately seated himself upon a coffin near the block of stone on which Jonathan Carnabie was placed. The old man started at what he considered to be an act of impious desecration: but the Burker, not comprehending the meaning of that movement, fancied it was produced by a nearer view of his own hang-dog features; and he exclaimed, "I tell you what it is, my old friend—I know I'm not so 'ansome as some people is; but I'm a deuced sight better: for try me at hard work, or question me as to my morals, or anythink of that sort, and you'll just see what an admirable feller I am."

"I was not thinking of your personal appearance," replied the old sexton: "but I wish you would get off that coffin and go and sit down upon the steps."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the Burker, obeying with alacrity: and then bethinking himself of the sexton's brandy-flask, he gave a visible shudder,—observing, "It's uncommon cold notwithstanding the season of the year."

"Refresh yourself," said Jonathan; and he handed the flask.

"Your wery good health, sir—and here's wishing you a long life and a merry von," said Mr. Barnes, by way of complimentary preface to a somewhat prolonged application to the contents of the flask.

"A merry life!" exclaimed old Jonathan: "how can you talk in such a light strain? What can the merriment be for one who has all his days been accustomed to dwell amongst the dead, so that the gloom of vaults and sepulchres and the damp of graves have become habitual to him? But you were saying just now that you were the man who would become my assistant——"

"And an uncommon handy feller you'll find me, I can tell you," rejoined the Burker. "But how is it I find you in this here place at such an hour of the night? I don't say it isn't agreeable enough—I like it uncommon—it's quite a change—and wariety is charming."

"This vault," answered old Jonathan solemnly, "belongs to the Featherstones of Featherstone Hall. It's a very old family—and all these coffins that you see around, contain scions of that race. Another—a promising young man as ever you could wish to see—died a few days ago; and he will be buried here to-morrow. There was a marriage in the church this morning—and I could not find it in my heart to raise the stone of this vault till the evening——"

"And you don't mean to say you did it by yourself?" exclaimed the Burker.

"No—I had an assistant in the task," rejoined Jonathan: "but the instant it was over, he hurried away, frightened at the gloom of the building when once the dusk had set in. You see that *I* am not frightened: I came and sate myself down here to determine where the coffin should be put to-morrow——and now you know how it is that you find me in such a place at such an hour."

"If I was your assistant," remarked the Burker, "instead of running away the moment work was over, I should like to come down into these here places and have a chat—more partikler when there's the brandy-flask to keep the cold out of one's throat."

Jonathan Carnabie deliberated with himself for a few minutes; and having decided upon engaging the services of the man who had so singularly offered himself, he proceeded to specify the duties which an assistant would have to perform, as well as the present emoluments which he would receive,—observing as an additional inducement, that if Barney conducted himself well he might be certain of succeeding to the office of grave-digger at his (Jonathan's) death. The Burker accepted the proffered terms; and the bargain was sealed with another drain from the brandy-flask.

"And now, my good man," said Jonathan, "as you are doubtless weary and hungered, I will take you to my cottage where you can refresh and repose yourself for to-night; and to-morrow I can perhaps help you to a cheap lodging with some humble but respectable people."

"I've already took such an affection for you, sir," answered the Burker, "that if you've only got some old shed or out-house belonging to your place, I would make myself as happy and comfortable as a king. I could turn my hand to a thousand little odd jobs——"

"Well, well, we shall see about it," replied the sexton. "Meantime follow me."

They issued from the vault, and passed out of the church,—Jonathan having previously extinguished his lantern. He locked the door with a huge key; and striking into a narrow path, led the way through the churchyard. The Burker was not particular in keeping to the path; but he now and then trampled over the graves,—which being presently perceived by the old man, caused him suddenly to stop short.

"You must not set foot upon any one of these sacred hillocks," he said, with his wonted gravity: "and for two reasons. In the first place because it's desecration; and in the second place because there are certain families—aye, even amongst the poorest—who pay a trifle annually to have the graves of their deceased relatives kept in good order——Not but that I devote my care to those for which no fee is paid——And here, for instance," added the old man, again stopping short after having slowly walked on a few paces,—"here is the best kept grave in the whole place: and yet I have never received a farthing for attending to it."

He pointed to a grave which had a stone at its head; and in the beautiful clearness of the night, it was easy for the Burker to perceive that it was indeed well kept,—the turf being all smooth over the hillock, and brambles stretched across to prevent any intrusive sheep from nibbling at the grass.

"Look! You perceive there is no name upon that stone," said the sexton,—"nothing but the date of the deceased's death——*October*, 1830."

"And why is there no name?" asked the Burker.

"Because the name which the poor deceased lady possessed, was never known," replied Jonathan Carnabie. "She was a stranger—and she died mad——Yes, it was a deep, silent, brooding madness——But it is a sad tale, and I cannot tell it you now."

"Who died mad? who died in the midst of a deep, brooding madness?" exclaimed a wild voice suddenly breaking in upon the momentary silence, which followed the old sexton's remark; and at the same time a female, having the appearance of a crazed gipsy, appeared upon the spot as if she had arisen out of the earth or sprung up from behind one of the adjacent tombstones. "Who died mad, I ask you?" she repeated vehemently. "There are indeed sorrows in this world sufficient to turn the strongest brain—and I have seen those and pass into the enclosure. Being in the commission of the peace, he vowed that he would send them all to the treadmill, where instead of capering upon stilts, they should dance upon an everlasting staircase, to the drumming and piping of the starveling German, if the governor of the gaol thought fit to allow such exercise of his musical powers. Now, we must observe that the old Baronet, Mrs. Oxenden, and Laura were all three seated in the drawing-room at the time when the itinerant performers appeared in front of the mansion. Laura was deeply dejected, and so completely out of spirits that neither by threats nor by cajolery could Mrs. Oxenden draw her out from that desponding apathy. The position of affairs was most embarrassing for Mrs. Oxenden: she feared lest Sir John Steward should become sickened or disgusted and back out of the purpose which he had hitherto entertained. She therefore caught all in a moment at the presence of these mountebanks as the possible means of inspiring her young sister with some little tinge of gaiety, if only for a few transient minutes.

"The rogues and scoundrels!" ejaculated Sir John, who was in an exceeding ill-humour at the dead lethargic coldness of the beautiful Laura: "I will have them every one sent to the House of Correction, I repeat! Here—let the footmen come—I'll swear them in as constables—it is a regular breach of the peace—I'll read the riot act—I'll—I'll—play the very devil!"

"Let them proceed, Sir John," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, darting upon him a significant look with her superb eyes: and then, in a hasty whisper, she added, "Everything must be done to amuse and cheer Laura's mind at present."

"Aye, to be sure!" exclaimed the Baronet: "they may be honest, well-intentioned people after all. Poor fellows! I have wronged them—they are doing their best to pick up an honest penny—and as there just happens to be a halfpenny on the mantel-piece ——"

"Nonsense, Sir John!" said Mrs. Oxenden aside: for we should observe that the meanness of the Baronet in some things was proportionate with his lavish extravagance in disbursing gold upon his own sensuous pleasures.

Mrs. Oxenden took out several shillings from her purse; and going forth upon the balcony, she flung them out to the mountebanks, who speedily picked them up. Returning into the room, she accosted her sister, saying, "You know not, my dear Laura, what surprising feats these gymnastic performers are displaying. It is quite entertaining—I feel as if I were a child once more, and could enter into the spirit of them:"—then stooping her head towards Laura's ear, she added, "Come, my dear girl, do cheer up a little—shake off this dreadful despondency——you know that I have nothing but your best interests at heart."

"My best interests?" said the young maiden, looking up with an air so woe-begone that it would have melted any heart save one of hardest flint.

"Yes—to be sure," whispered Mrs. Oxenden, hastily and also petulantly. "Am I to explain it to you all over and over again? But come, my dear Laura—go out for a few minutes on the balcony—the fresh air will do you good—and the feats of these men will divert you."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Oxenden took her young sister's hand, and led her towards the window: for Laura had relapsed into a state of deepest dejection, so that she suffered herself to be guided as if she were an automaton. She passed out upon the balcony; and Mrs. Oxenden remained with her for a few minutes. At first Laura contemplated the mountebanks in a kind of listless vacant manner: but by degrees her eyes seemed to display more interest in their proceedings; and Mrs. Oxenden, believing that she was really cheered, returned into the drawing-room to impart this intelligence to the old Baronet. The truth was that Laura did experience just that small amount of interest which a mind, sunk deep in lethargic despondency, was calculated to feel at any trifling circumstance that might break in upon the deeply mournful monotony of her thoughts. And yet it was rather the eye than the mind that was thus attracted—for while the poor young lady followed with her looks the exploits of the itinerants, her soul still continued brooding on the afflictions which haunted it.

But she was now alone upon the balcony. The wind blew sharp from the north-east, though the sun was shining brightly; and she drew around her the shawl which her sister had thrown over her shoulders ere conducting her out upon that balcony. One of the mountebanks came close under the window, and suddenly drew forth something from the breast of his party-coloured jacket. Laura observed the action—but considered it to be some part of the performance.

"One word!" said the mountebank; "one word! Quick, young lady!—are you Miss Hall?"

"Yes—that is my name," was Laura's hasty response: for she instantaneously perceived there was something significant in the man's proceedings; and to one in her desperate position the veriest trifle appeared like a straw of hope floating past and to be clutched at by her hand.

"This note!" rejoined the mountebank: "take it quick!—it is from Mr. Beverley! We will return to perform again to-morrow at the same hour; and you can then give me the answer."

It were impossible to describe the wild feelings of joy which thrilled through the frame of the beauteous young maiden as these words reached her ear. She trembled with those emotions for a few instants: she was bewildered with a sense of relief, hope, and happiness. The mountebank made an impatient gesture—the young lady, recalled thereby to her self-possession, flung a rapid glance behind her into the drawing-room—and perceiving that her sister and the old Baronet were in earnest conversation together—she took the note from the hand of the friendly performer. The next instant he was dancing and capering away on the top of his stilts with greater elasticity than ever; and in the effusion of his joy at having so successfully executed his commission, he bestowed (with one of the stilts aforesaid) so hearty a thwack across Raggidbak's shoulders that the mouth-organ for an instant sent forth a peculiar sound which seemed to be composed of a yell and a growl.

Laura had thrust the note into the bosom of her dress; and then she exerted all her powers to avoid the outward betrayal of her feelings that were now so different from those which a few minutes back she had experienced. Mrs. Oxenden returned to the balcony—and said, "You are diverted, Laura?"

"Yes!" replied the young lady, scarcely able to repress a gush of emotions: "more—much more than I could possibly have anticipated!"

"I am glad of it," said Mrs. Oxenden: "we will have these men again to-morrow."

Laura was about to give expression to a joyous affirmative, when she was struck by the imprudence of displaying too much interest in these proceedings—and she accordingly held her peace. Her unprincipled sister summoned one of the itinerants towards the balcony; and this individual happened to be the bearer of the letter—as indeed he was also the leader of the troop.

"Do you purpose, my good man," inquired Mrs. Oxenden "to remain in this neighbourhood for a day or two?"

"Well, ma'am," replied the fellow, with the ready-witted impudence which, harmless enough, characterises his class,—"we had a particular engagement to be at Canterbury to-morrow, to perform in the presence of the Archbishop, his clergy, and all the surrounding nobility and gentry: but if it is your pleasure, ma'am, that we shall attend here again, I'm sure we would put off all the Archbishops in the world rather than disappoint you and the young lady."

"In that case," rejoined Mrs. Oxenden, smiling, "you must come hither again to-morrow at the same hour—and here is your retaining fee."

Another silver coin found its way to the hand of the mountebank; and he shortly afterwards departed with his comrades—of course including Baron Raggidbak. On their return into the town, the mountebank at once put off his professional costume—dressed himself in his plain clothes—and proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where Edgar Beverley and Christian were anxiously awaiting his arrival. He communicated to them the result of his mission—and gladdened them still more by the intelligence that circumstances were so far favouring their views that his mountebank troop had actually been engaged to return to perform in front of Verner House on the morrow. The heart of Edgar Beverley was now elate with hope; and fervid indeed were his expressions of gratitude for the counsel and assistance afforded him by our young hero. The mountebank was liberally rewarded; and he took his departure, promising to fulfil his engagement on the morrow. Lieutenant Beverley was careful to keep in-doors throughout that day, for fear lest the old Baronet or Mrs. Oxenden might happen to pay a visit to Ramsgate and encounter him in the streets if he were imprudent enough to leave the hotel. Christian kept him company for the greater portion of the day—merely issuing out to take a walk for an hour or two: but during his ramble he saw nothing of either Sir John Steward or Mrs. Oxenden. The two young gentlemen dined together in the evening; and the result of the morrow's proceedings was awaited with some degree of suspense—in which however hope was predominant.

CHAPTER LXXII.

MRS. OXENDEN.

It was evening: and Laura had just retired to her own chamber, at about half-past nine o'clock, under the plea of a severe headache. Her real motive was however to find an opportunity for penning an answer to Edgar Beverley's note; and it was only by thus withdrawing at a somewhat early hour that she could hope to find such an occasion—for her chamber was an inner one opening from that occupied by her sister, who thus took care to act as the guardian by night of the young maiden, so as to prevent the possibility of escape. Laura had read her lover's billet: it had filled her with hope, and joy, and gratitude; and though she had done her best to wear the same demeanour as before, yet she had not been altogether able to prevent herself from appearing to be in better spirits.

On retiring to her room, she speedily dismissed the maid who came to attend upon her night-toilet; and she was about to sit down to pen a hasty reply to Edgar's note, when she heard the outer door open; and she had only just time to recover from her confusion and trepidation, when Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. We ought perhaps to observe that Laura was entirely ignorant—and that the purity of her mind prevented her from suspecting—that her sister's antecedents were not the most correct in the world, and that she had been the kept mistress of several wealthy persons, amongst whom was Sir John Steward.

Mrs. Oxenden, on entering her chamber, embraced her sister with every appearance of the most affectionate cordiality; and in a tone which seemed fraught with a corresponding sincerity, she said, "Dearest Laura, you know not how happy I am to perceive that you are beginning to cheer up—or at all events that you are not quite so depressed as you have hitherto been. You may think, Laura, that I have played a harsh part towards you: but I was merely doing my duty as a sister who is so much older than yourself that you stand in the light of a daughter towards me."

Laura made no answer: she could scarcely believe that her sister spoke in exact accordance with the truth; and yet it revolted against the natural generosity of her nature to arrive at a contrary conclusion.

"I am sure that you are making up your mind to be reasonable," continued Mrs. Oxenden: "I felt confident that when your mind became sufficiently calm for deliberate reflection, you would see how completely I have been studying your best interests. But you spoke to me this morning in the drawing-room as if you fancied it was otherwise; and perhaps I answered you impatiently, and even unkindly, when I appeared to upbraid you for compelling me to give the same explanations over and over again. I am sorry, dear Laura, if I did thus speak somewhat too hastily; and I was determined to take the first opportunity to remove that impression from your mind."

Laura gazed with her beautiful blue eyes earnestly upon her sister's countenance, as if seeking for the assurance that a real affectionate sincerity characterized all that she had just said; and Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely prevent her looks from quailing beneath that gaze of artless innocence.

"Yes, my dear sister," resumed the wily woman, taking Laura's hand and pressing it between both her own as if with the tenderest cordiality, "I am indeed studying your best interests in everything that I suggest or propose. Suffer me—for the last time, I hope—to reason with you a little upon certain points, and thereby aid you in strengthening your mind and assisting you onward in that better course of feelings which you have for the last few hours displayed. You know, Laura, that Mr. Oxenden's means are limited—that it is a Government pension which he enjoys—and that it will die with him. Therefore at his death—which according to all natural probabilities will take place long before my own—I shall be left with such small income as will arise from my husband's present savings and from an insurance on his life. Hitherto, my dear sister, I have been enabled to support you in comfort if not in affluence; and upon this ground alone I might claim some right to your dutiful obedience, as if I were your mother. But let us view the matter in a different light. You are now of an age when you ought to think of settling in the world. If Mr. Oxenden were to die soon—before you were thus settled—that income which would be a bare maintenance for me, would constitute absolute poverty for yourself and me; and without the means of going into society, how could you hope to form an eligible alliance——"

A burning blush overspread the countenance of the young maiden, as she said with more firmness than her timid nature was wont to allow her to display towards her sister, "You know that my heart is already engaged: think you therefore that I can possibly listen with a very pleasant feeling to this language of yours, in which you speak of eligible alliances as if they were such mere worldly matters——"

"And so they are!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden vehemently: for she in a moment saw the necessity of re-asserting her empire over her delicate-minded sister. "I know full well to what you allude—you would speak of Edgar Beverley: but have I not already told you that according to some long-lost document which has recently come to light, and the existence of which was previously unknown or forgotten, Sir John Steward is enabled to cut off the entail of his estates and to bequeath them to whomsoever he may choose? Have I not likewise informed you over and over again that his solicitor is already taking the necessary steps for this purpose, and that he will most probably be here the day after to-morrow with the marriage-settlements completed——and likewise," added Mrs. Oxenden impressively, "with the draught of Sir John Steward's will—that will by virtue of which you are at his death to inherit the great bulk of his wealth,—a comparatively small sum being bequeathed to me, and which I am sure my own sister will not grudge me?"

"Oh, if you knew how painful it is to me," cried Laura, with a visible shudder, "to hear you thus speculating upon death——"

But then she stopped suddenly short, as the idea struck her that it was useless as well as impolitic to argue upon the point; inasmuch as she was secretly resolved in her own mind never to wed Sir John Steward—and inasmuch too as against her fluttering heart rested the billet which had that day brought assurances of love, of succour, and of hope.

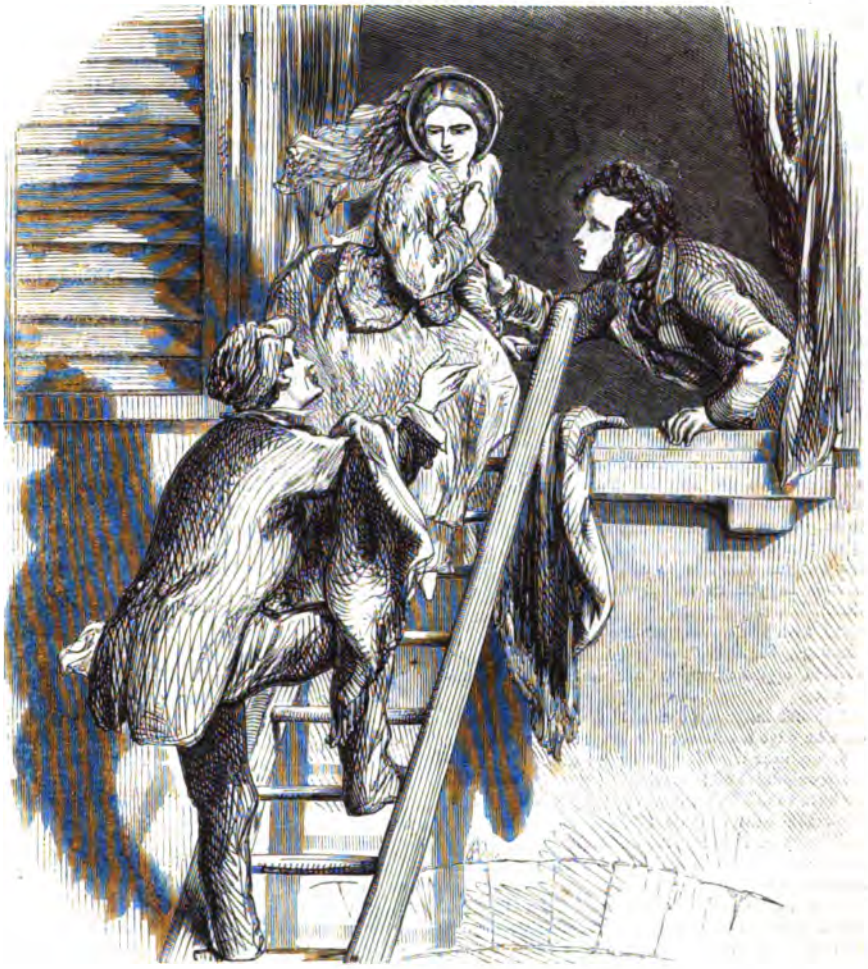
"I see my dear girl," continued Mrs. Oxenden, who did not rightly comprehend what was passing in her sister's mind, "that you are doing your best to exercise a becoming control over your feelings—and that when they threaten to get the better of you, you magnanimously check yourself. I am sure that this reiteration of all I have previously told you, has its uses and its advantages: and therefore—for the last time, I hope, as I just now said—I will recapitulate those reasonings which I have adopted towards you before. You are aware that Sir John Steward sent for me from Brighton, declaring in his letter that he had a most important communication to make to me; this communication was to the effect that as the conduct of his nephew had been most unduteous in many respects——"

"Do not vilify Edgar Beverley!" interrupted Laura, unable to restrain herself when aspersions were thrown out against her lover.

"Well, Laura," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "I will speak in terms as delicate as possible. Putting all Sir John Steward's reasons out of the question, the substantive fact remains that he determined to avail himself of the recently discovered document to break off the entail and dispose of his property—which is immense—according to his own goodwill and pleasure. It is his purpose to make such a settlement that will leave Mr. Beverley in possession of the two hundred pounds which have hitherto been granted to him as an allowance. It is true that at his death Mr. Beverley may, under certain circumstances, succeed to the title: but even if it should be so, what is a title without wealth adequate to its support? A mere encumbrance! To what, then, is Edgar Beverley reduced? To the condition of a poor subaltern, with a couple of hundred a year besides his pay. Would you throw yourself into his arms, when on the other hand you may become the bride of a man who is enormously rich, and whose rank will be reflected on yourself?"

Laura was again on the point of giving a hasty and even indignant answer to these cold-blooded mercenary calculations of her sister; when she was once more struck by the inutility of the course, as well as by the impolicy of saying aught that could possibly excite a suspicion in Mrs. Oxenden's mind.

"As yet Mr. Beverley," continued the latter lady, who, with all her penetration and cunning, could not fathom what was really passing in her sister's mind, and who therefore believed that her own arguments were making the wished-for impression—"as yet Mr. Beverley is in total ignorance of the existence of that document which enables his uncle to disinherit him. He clings to the belief—as indeed he himself assured me at Brighton not long since—that he is the heir presumptive to Sir John's estates, which he supposes to be inalienable so far as the rigour of the entail is concerned. But he will find himself mistaken. Sir John does not however wish that the intelli-



gence should be communicated to him until all proceedings now pending be finished and settled. My dear Laura, what more need I urge? what more need I say? On the one hand a title and wealth await you: on the other hand a title perhaps, but inevitable poverty. And then you must consider, my dear sister, that you owe some duteousness and gratitude towards me;—and by assenting to this marriage with Sir John Steward, you will place me beyond the reach of anxious cares for the future."

"Enough, sister—enough!" said Laura. "I have nothing to reply to your arguments."

Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely keep back an exclamation of wild, tumultuous joy, as interpreting her sister's response according to her own wishes, she beheld therein the triumph of her schemes. She embraced the young maiden, lavishing caresses upon her: and then she issued from the chamber, with the intimation that she must rejoin Sir John for another half-hour in the drawing-room ere she could retire to rest.

When Laura was alone, she wept for a few moments at the thought of having played the hypocrite in the presence of her sister, and in having suffered her to depart under a false impression with regard to her sentiments and views. But she soon ceased to trouble and agitate herself on this point; for naturally ingenuous and truth-loving though she were, yet she could not help feeling that whatsoever duplicity or concealment she had just been practising, was not merely venial, but even justifiable under existing circumstances. Hastily wiping away her tears, she sate down to pen her letter to Edgar Beverley.

In the meantime Mrs. Oxenden had returned to the drawing-room, where the Baronet was half reclining upon a sofa, sipping a glass of choice liqueur. Mrs. Oxenden placed herself in a chair near him; and with triumph upon her countenance, she said, "Laura has yielded finally and completely, as I all along assured you that she would."

"Then the marriage may be celebrated by the priest to-morrow?" exclaimed Sir John, in a tone of hasty inquiry; "and we can set off immediately afterwards to have the Protestant ceremony performed by special license in London, according to our original plan?"

"I fear that it cannot be so," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "for you know that the priest had scruples in pronouncing the nuptial blessing unless Laura gave her fullest and completest assent. This she has only just done: she will require to-morrow to think well over it—for I am as intimately acquainted with her disposition as it is possible to be. But the day after——"

"Ah, I understand you!" growled Sir John surlily. "You are a woman of the world—and you will have all the settlements signed and sealed before you give me your sister. Do you think I shall fly from my word? do you suppose I am not sincere in disinheriting a younker for whom I have no more love nor affection than for the veriest stranger—but whom on the contrary I am inclined to hate because he shows his father's independent spirit? or do you think that I shall fly away from the bargain which is to make over ten thousand pounds to you as the price for your charming sister?"

"I wish you would not use such coarse blunt language, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, as a flush appeared upon her handsome countenance.

"Coarse language, indeed!" he ejaculated: and then he gave a still coarser laugh. "Why, look you, my dear friend!—let us not shut our eyes to the true nature of the transaction—because when we have to deliberate over it, it is inconvenient to blink the truth and go beating about the bush. Besides, you and I have known each other long enough and well enough to have no disguise between us——"

"Well, my dear Sir John," said Mrs. Oxenden deeming it expedient to cajole and conciliate the old man as much as possible; "have it entirely your own way—and put the matter in whatsoever light you may think fit."

"All I want is this," continued the Baronet,—"that you shall not flatter yourself I am your dupe, or that you have caught me as a veritable dotard in your meshes."

"Good heavens, Sir John!" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, frightened lest things were about to take a turn but little in accordance with her hopes and views; "how *can* you think of talking in a strain so ungenerous—so unkind——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Baronet, who was really under the influence of this deep designing woman, but who wished to persuade himself that it was otherwise and that he was altogether independent in his own mode of action,—"we will not get to angry words: but now that affairs are growing towards a termination, it is just as well for us to understand each other. Look you—how rests the matter? I receive communications from Brighton, from my nephew and yourself, to the effect that he has fallen desperately in love with your sister Laura. I at once send off for you to come to me and receive personal explanations; because I think they are due to you after all that in previous years had taken place betwixt you and me. You come accordingly—and I then tell you in confidence that I mean to disinherit my nephew, as I possess the power to do so—and that I mean to marry in the hope of having an heir. Then you draw me such a picture of your beautiful sister that you make the blood thrill in my veins——"

"But why this recapitulation," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, "of all that is so well known to us both?"

"Because I am resolved," returned Sir John, somewhat gruffly, "that the matter shall be established clearly between us in all its details. Well, as I was saying, you straightway drew me such a picture of your sister that I was quite ravished by it—and fancied myself altogether young again. Patience!—do not interrupt me. I told you at the time that if the original proved only half as charming as the portraiture, I would gladly make her Lady Steward. Now, I do not hesitate to confess that skilful as you are in the art of word-painting, and vivid as your verbal delineation was of Laura's charms, you adhered strictly to the truth—you did not exaggerate——"

"Well, I am glad to hear that my promises and your hopes were completely fulfilled," interjected Mrs. Oxenden.

"Oh, yes!" ejaculated Sir John: "I freely admit that such was the case. But in another sense you deceived me somewhat."

"Deceived you?" ejaculated Mrs. Oxenden.

"Yes," rejoined the Baronet: "but yet I do not think you did it wilfully. I fancied from what you said that I should find her less coy—or at all events more susceptible of kind assiduities and attentions——"

"You could scarcely expect, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, "that a young maiden on being introduced to you for the first time——"

"Yes, my dear friend," interposed the Baronet: "but during your journey from Brighton to Ramsgate, you broke your mind to her—you told her that she must banish Edgar Beverley from her recollection—and that she must prepare herself to look upon me as her future husband."

"All this I did, Sir John, as you are well aware," answered Mrs. Oxenden impressively; "and though not remarkable for any peculiar nicety of feelings, I can assure you it was a task which I should by no means like to have to execute over again."

"Well, well, I give you credit for all good intentions," remarked Sir John: "but still you must allow that my first meeting with your sister was but little flattering to me. First she looked at me in a sort of wild bewilderment as if she had not rightly comprehended whom I was: and then, when you formally mentioned my name, she positively gave a shriek——"

"But you should make allowances, Sir John, for the circumstances which attended our arrival. The breaking down of the postchaise—and then you will admit too that your costume was not precisely that which becomes you best."

"It is the one though that I *like* the best!" answered the Baronet: "it leaves me comfortable and easy:"—and he stretched himself out upon the sofa; for he was still attired in the very same manner as that to which reference had been just made. "Well," he continued, "we will put aside the circumstances of our first meeting: but do you not recollect what trouble you had to get the girl down into the garden to say a few words to me yesterday morning—and how all my cajoleries, and protestations, and representations appeared either to frighten her or else to be thrown away upon her?"

"But what is the use of recapitulating all these things," inquired Mrs. Oxenden impatiently, "since the final consent has just been given?"

"Ah! my recommendation that the old negress should be placed in attendance upon her, doubtless went for something," observed Sir John, with a complacent air: "it was a sort of terrorism which mingled usefully with your arguments and with my attentions: so, you perceive, there was a blending of influences under which the sweet girl could not help yielding. Well, as you say, the final consent is given—and I am satisfied. But now we come to the point. I want you to understand that I have done all this with my eyes open, and that I have not been led into it by any intrigues or designs on your part. I wanted a wife —and you have found me one. It has saved me a world of trouble in respect to courtship;—and besides, I might have travelled all over England without finding a young creature so completely to my taste. Then, as to the bargain which was settled between us, it was clear and specific enough, and shall be faithfully kept. You are to receive ten thousand pounds as a sort of acknowledgment for having conducted the affair with delicacy and success: I am to settle three thousand a-year upon your sister;—and all these things shall be done. I have moreover promised to make my will in her favour so far as the residue of my property is concerned: and that likewise will I do. My attorney will be here by the first train the day after to-morrow. That will be at noon—and everything shall be at once settled. But again I tell you that you must not run away with the idea you are dealing with an old dotard——"

"For shame, Sir John, to impute such a thing to me—or to pay so ill a compliment to your own self!"—and there was a most artfully devised commingling of apparent vexation and complimentary cajolery in Mrs. Oxenden's look and manner as well as in her words.

"Now, are you sure," asked the Baronet, "that Edgar Beverley could not possibly get upon your track when you left Brighton?"

"Totally impossible!" answered Mrs. Oxenden: "the precautions which I took were so well arranged. But why did you ask the question? what fear can you entertain concerning him? You have it in your power to disinherit him: he cannot therefore assume a menacing or dictatorial attitude—and he is moreover at your mercy for the allowance you give him, and which, with quite enough generosity, you are about to convert into a permanent annuity."

"True, true," said the old Baronet. "I don't know what reason I should have to stand in any fear of that self-sufficient jackanapes: nevertheless, love between young people sometimes leads to strange unforeseen incidents—and we do know there is a proverb which says that it laughs at locksmiths."

"Trust me, Sir John, for the safe keeping of my sister Laura. What with the negress in one room and myself in another, she could not possibly escape at night; and as for the daytime—— But really it is altogether unnecessary to give you these assurances: for Laura has been overcome by my arguments—her assent is final—and I know her well enough to be aware that when once she makes up her mind to a particular course, and that course is dictated by me, she will not seek to retract nor to deviate from it. By the bye, how simple a thing it was which gave the first turn in our favour. Trivial and even stupid as the idea might have seemed at the time, it is not the less a fact that the performance of those mountebanks whom you were going to send to prison, cheered her spirits and produced that revulsion which has progressed during the remainder of the day, and has this evening rendered her completely docile and pliant."

"Well," observed the Baronet, "we must keep her amused to-morrow: but she must not be suffered to set foot outside the premises, except in the garden at the back of the house——"

"Leave everything to me," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "You see that Laura's mind is so artless and innocent, it is the least thing childish—or at all events girlish—and she is amused by a trifle. Only think, Sir John, of what an amiable unsophisticated young creature you are about to have as a wife! But as for the amusements of to-morrow, I took care to tell those itinerant jugglers to come again; and I will make them stop as long as Laura appears to be diverted with them."

The conversation between this most delectable couple was carried on for a little while longer; and then they separated to their respective chambers, —Mrs. Oxenden to reflect with secret triumph on those schemes which were to give her immediate possession of ten thousand pounds, and the prospective control of her sister's wealth at the old Baronet's death,—and the old Baronet himself to gloat over the idea of soon folding in his arms the loveliest being on whom his eyes had ever yet settled.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

EDGAR AND CHRISTIAN.

It was about two o'clock on the following day, and Edgar Beverley was pacing to and fro in his apartment at the Royal Hotel in an agitated and anxious manner. Christian was seated at the table; and every now and then he enjoined his friend to be composed, for that everything would be sure to go right.

"It is two o'clock," said Beverley, consulting his watch; "and our friend the mountebank ought to be back by this time."

"How can we tell in what manner he may be delayed?" asked our hero.

"But what if Laura should not have an opportunity of slipping the note into his hand?" exclaimed the lieutenant, who was conjuring up all kinds of misadventures—and, in ordinary parlance, was actually meeting them half way,—a weakness which is common and yet natural enough on the part of those who love.

But before Christian had time to give him an answer, the door opened; and the friendly mountebank made his appearance. Edgar surveyed him with the intensest anxiety: but it only lasted for a few instants,—inasmuch as the man drew forth a billet which he presented to the lieutenant.

"Heaven be thanked!" ejaculated Beverley: and recognizing the handwriting, he pressed the letter to his lips.

"You had better withdraw now," said Christian to the mountebank: "but come back presently in case there be aught else wherein your services may be rendered available."

The juggler retired; and in the meanwhile Edgar Beverley had torn open the precious billet and was deeply absorbed in its contents. Christian glanced at him for a moment, to assure himself that all was right; and the look which he thus flung, led to a satisfactory conclusion, inasmuch as his friend's countenance was radiant with joy.

"Yes, my dear Ashton," exclaimed Beverley, grasping our hero's hand when the perusal of the letter was finished; "the hopes you have held out will be realized. Here! read for yourself."

"No," responded Christian: "a communication of that kind is sacred."

"But, my dear friend," rejoined Edgar quickly, "I have no secrets from you! Besides, should I not be wanting in a proper confidence—would it not be unkind—ungenerous——"

"Lovers," interposed Christian, "write to each other in that fond endearing strain which constitutes the sanctity as well as the charm of their correspondence. I can assure you that I have a delicacy in reading the letter: pray sit down and tell me all that it is necessary for me to know for the furtherance of the plans in which I am so heartily and so gladly succouring you."

"You shall have your own way," answered Beverley. "But perhaps you will be surprised that I am thus happy and joyous when I tell you that this very note,—which gives me the assurance of my Laura's unwavering love, and of her readiness to be rescued by me from an odious captivity,—likewise acquaints me with the fact that I am naught but a poor lieutenant who henceforth must look upon himself as having nothing but his pay."

"I can of course understand," said Christian, "that if you run away with Miss Hall—whom, by the bye, you denominated Neville in your history——"

"Because her name is Laura Neville Hall," remarked Edgar.

"I was about to say," resumed Christian," "that I can well understand how your uncle will at once stop your allowance: but he cannot alienate from you your rightful heritage if he should die without lawful male issue."

"Yes—but he *has* that power!" answered Beverley: "this note conveys to me the fact. Some old document, which a lawyer has just disinterred from amidst dusty mouldering papers, establishes the right of breaking off the entail. What care I for that? Laura will be mine—and if we be poor in one sense, we shall be rich in the wealth of our heart's love. Oh, yes, my dear Ashton! I am supremely happy—I am full of hope and confidence—we will scatter all difficulties to the winds—and never, never will you have served a more grateful friend than I shall prove myself to you!"

"I know it," answered Christian. "And now tell me, what course are we next to pursue?"

"It is as we suspected," resumed Beverley: "my villanous uncle seeks to make Laura his bride; and her vile sister——alas! that I should be thus compelled to speak of my beloved's nearest relative!——is the chief agent in carrying out the hoped-for sacrifice of youth and innocence to old age and iniquity. But by some means Laura has succeeded in lulling them into security; and by a wrong interpretation of certain words she has uttered, they flatter themselves that she has given her consent. Not however that their vigilance is relaxed: on the contrary——"

"We will baffle them, however watchful they may be!" exclaimed Christian. "Pray proceed."

"It appears that Laura sleeps in a chamber situated between two others," continued Beverley. "The first—which opens from the landing—is occupied by her sister Mrs. Oxenden: then comes her own: and beyond that is a dressing-room in which a bed has been made up for the accommodation of a horrible negress whose influence has been used to coerce and intimidate the poor girl."

"But is there a window to Miss Hall's apartment?" inquired Christian hastily: "I mean, is there a window looking upon the front or back of the house?"

"It looks upon the front," answered Beverley; "and she has so accurately described it in her letter, that we cannot possibly mistake it. She moreover tells me that it will not be difficult for her to retire to her chamber at about half-past nine o'clock this evening: the negress will not seek the dressing-room until ten; and Mrs. Oxenden will not repair to her own chamber until half-an-hour later. Whatever, therefore, is to be done, must be accomplished between half-past nine and ten o'clock."

"There are thirty good minutes," exclaimed Christian; "and almost as many seconds would be sufficient for our purpose. We will enlist the services of the friendly mountebank—we will have a postchaise-and-four in waiting—and if success do not crown our enterprise, I shall never have been more mistaken in all my life."

Our hero and the lieutenant continued to deliberate upon the details of their plan until the friendly juggler returned to the hotel. He received his instructions, together with a liberal reward for the faithful execution of his mission of that day; and the man took his departure infinitely delighted with the lucrative employment which he had thus temporarily found.

In the same way that love at one time feeds itself with the wildest hopes, so at another does it torture itself with a thousand anxieties. Yet, paradoxical though the phrases may seem, love's hopes are ever interwoven with mistrust, and its apprehensions are permeated with beams of hopefulness. Love hopes on in the face of despair itself; and it sometimes despairs when it ought to hope. It is a passion which in its association with other sentiments is made up of contradictions: but as the river receives all confluent streamlets and absorbs those varied and insignificant waters in its own rolling volume—so does the tide of love's passion flow onward and onward, amalgamating in one flood the different feelings and discrepant emotions which become its undercurrents, and with their conflicting elements serve to swell and give a forward impetus to the whole. And then, too, this river which we are metaphorically taking as an illustration of love's progress, pursues its course at one time amidst dark frowning rocks, blackening its surface with their shadows, and shutting out the sun of hope: but at another time it meanders through smiling meads, where its banks are garlanded with flowers, and where its transparent waters shine brilliantly, with the sunbeams playing upon its bosom and kissing all its gentle ripples. For well has the poet said that "the course of true love never did run smooth;" and if we take the passion from its first inception in the human breast—trace its progress—and study its track, until it at length bears Hymen's bark exultingly upon its bosom—we shall find that there is no more appropriate similitude than that which is furnished by the course of some of earth's proudest rivers. For is not love at first like a little silver stream in the profundities of a wilderness—always flowing and swelling onward, though not always seen—then widening and deepening—now diverted from its course by some obstacle, now dammed up until the weight of its waters break down the impediment—thus sometimes free and sometimes checked, though never altogether subdued, until its channel becomes broad and deep and its waters expand into a glorious flood. Oh! wherefore have novelists and poets ever taken love as their most favourite theme? why has the minstrel made it the subject of his harmony, and the limner illustrated its episodes upon his canvass? Is it not because it is the most important passion which the human heart can possibly know—a source alike of the sublimest happiness and the profoundest misery—sometimes a blessing, at others a curse—and often proving the pivot upon which turn the mightiest deeds as well as the gravest occurrences ever beholden upon the theatre of the world? What reader, therefore, will ever quarrel with his author if for a space he digress to discourse upon the varied elements which form the compound of love, or to expatiate upon the immensity of its influence over the hearts as well as the transactions of human beings?

But we set out by observing that if love at one time feed itself upon the purest manna of hope—so at another does it voluntarily distil drops of bitterness into the cup which it drinks. Nor was the love of Edgar Beverley an exception to this rule. At first Laura's letter had inspired him with enthusiastic hope: but subsequently—during the hours which elapsed ere it was time to enter upon the execution of the settled plan—the young lieutenant gave way to a thousand torturing fears. Christian did all he could to soothe and tranquillise his friend, and to make him revert to the belief that everything would go right: but Christian himself, if similarly situated at the moment in respect to Isabella, would have been harrassed by precisely the same apprehensions. We will not therefore unnecessarily extend this portion of our narrative: but without further preface we will proceed to a description of the scenes which occurred in the evening of that memorable day.

At about twenty minutes past nine o'clock, a postchaise-and-four advanced at a slow pace into the neighbourhood of Verner House—the postilions thus gently walking their horses in order as much as possible to avoid the chance of the sounds of the equipage being heard within the walls of the habitation. The chaise contained three persons—Edgar Beverley, Christian Ashton, and the friendly mountebank—this last-mentioned individual being, as a matter of course, attired in his plain clothes. The equipage halted at a distance of barely a hundred yards from the house,—it being deemed expedient to have it thus close to the scene of action in case of the principal actors themselves being pressed hard by pursuit. Moreover, the spot chosen for the halting-place of the vehicle, was completely embowered by the trees skirting both sides of the road, and the boughs of which interlacingly joined overhead. Beverley, Ashton, and the mountebank alighted from the chaise; the postilions, already well instructed, and likewise liberally remunerated, retained their seats upon their horses; and the three individuals advanced cautiously, like a reconnoitring party, towards the house. They however soon stopped by the side of a thick hedge; and thence they drew forth a ladder which the mountebank and one of his companions had procured and concealed there in the course of the evening, according to the instructions given by the lieutenant and Christian. But scarcely had they thus possessed themselves of this necessary implement for the scaling of the fortress, —when, through the deep gloom of the evening, a female form was all in an instant descried advancing rapidly towards them. The woman had just passed by the equipage: she had therefore seen it—she was proceeding in the same direction as themselves—and if she belonged to Verner House, she would of course give the alarm. All this struck Edgar and his coadjutors in a moment: but just as the lieutenant was about to whisper some rapid words of consultation, our young hero's lips sent forth an ejaculation of "The negress!"

At the same moment he sprang forward and caught her by the arm. He had recognised her at once; her hideous countenance, as well as her apparel, pointed her out as the same whom he had seen in the garden, and to whom Laura Hall had specially alluded in her letter to Edgar Beverley. The woman, on being thus seized upon, gave vent to a shriek of terror: but Christian, vehemently bidding her remain silent, assured her that she had nothing to fear if she held her peace. She was much alarmed, and tremblingly besought that no mischief might be done her.

"Be silent," reiterated Christian, "and you have no ground for apprehension. Proceed! proceed!" he instantaneously added, thus addressing himself to Beverley: "you must leave me to take charge of this woman until——"

But having spoken this last word significantly, he stopped suddenly short; and Beverley hastened away with the mountebank,—the last-mentioned individual carrying the ladder over his shoulder. Christian had seen at a single mental glance that as it was absolutely necessary to keep the negress there as a prisoner until Laura's flight should be ensured, he himself was the most proper person to hold her in such custody. Edgar Beverley's presence in the rescue of his beloved was of course absolutely necessary; and Christian felt that the mountebank might not possibly be quite so firm or strenuous as he himself would be in holding the negress fast.

"She may hold out promises of heavier bribes from Sir John than Edgar can give," thought our hero to himself; "and the juggler might be tempted. The guardianship of this woman for the present shall consequently be my own care."

So soon as Beverley and the mountebank had hastened away from the spot, Christian said to the negress, "I have already assured you that no harm will befall you if you remain silent and motionless on the spot where you now stand. But I charge you not to trust too much to my forbearance: for I should be little inclined to stand upon punctilious terms with one who has been instrumental in keeping an innocent young lady in an odious captivity."

The horrible black woman was completely overawed by Christian's words and manner, which he purposely rendered fierce and threatening: and she continued quiet.

In the meantime Edgar Beverley and the mountebank had advanced towards the mansion; and the former had no difficulty in at once discovering which was the chamber occupied by his beloved Laura. Indeed, at the very moment that he and his assistant arrived in front of the dwelling, a light appeared in that particular room. Edgar's heart beat quickly: his ear could catch its pulsations as he and the mountebank paused in front of Verner House to assure themselves that no one else was lurking about outside. The night was very dark, but perfectly mild; and no suspicious sound reached them—nor could their eyes, straining to penetrate through the obscurity, discern any human form moving about. The ladder was accordingly planted against the window of Laura's chamber: and Edgar, rapidly ascending it, tapped gently at the glass. The few moments which followed ere the summons was answered, were full of acutest suspense for the lieutenant,—inasmuch as he could not see into the room, the heavy draperies being drawn completely over the casement, and it might not be Laura who was there—or if it were, it was by no means certain that she was alone. Her sister or a maid-servant might happen to be with her—although her note to her lover had given rise to a hope in altogether a contrary sense.

The suspense of Edgar Beverley was not however of long duration: the draperies parted in the centre—and the well-beloved Laura appeared to his view. Oh, with what ecstacy beat his heart! what joy thrilled through his form! The light of the wax-candles inside the chamber beamed upon his countenance; and a kindred animation of wild delight irradiated the young maiden's features as she recognised him who was dearer to her than any being in the world beside. Nevertheless, caution was not lost sight of—the window was opened gently—and then Laura's fair hand was pressed to Edgar's lips.

"Come, dearest—come!" he said in a low but fervid whisper: "the chaise is waiting—there must not be an instant's delay!"

"Dearest Edgar!" murmured the damsel, her joy being so excessive that her emotions now found vent in tears. "You know not how much I have suffered——But never, never, Edgar," she added more firmly, and likewise with a sudden access of solemnity,—"never, never will I forget all this goodness on your part!"

She pressed his hand, and flew to put on her bonnet and shawl: but her heart fluttered and her hand trembled so that she felt as if she had incurred the danger of being as much overpowered by joy as but a short time back she stood the chance of being overwhelmed with affliction. At length however, after the lapse of some moments—which seemed ages to the impatient lover—she was ready attired; and she rejoined him at the window. Still so timid and nervous was she, however, that he perceived at a glance she would not be able to descend the ladder without the most careful assistance; and vaulting over the window-sill, he sprang into the room, that he might help her out first, and thus be enabled to hold her hand as she descended the ladder. But at that very instant the sound of a door opening in the first room of the suite, reached the ears of the lovers; and Laura, suddenly becoming pale as death, faintly ejaculated, "My sister!"

Not for a single instant did Edgar Beverley lose his presence of mind: on the contrary, it all in a moment received the most vivid impulse; and with one spring across the room, he reached the door of communication between the two chambers. The handle of that door was already turning in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden,—when the key itself was turned by Edgar Beverley; and the next instant he was by Laura's side again.

"Open the door, Laura!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Oxenden from the opposite side of the secured portal: "open the door directly, I command you!"

"Energy, dearest Laura—energy and courage, for God's sake!" whispered Beverley. "The least hesitation—and everything is lost!"

But as Mrs. Oxenden's voice continued to peal from the opposite side of the door, the poor damsel was almost overwhelmed with affright; in such dread did she stand of her sister, that she could not possibly conquer her terrors. Nevertheless, by some little exertion on her own part, but more through the assistance of her lover, she passed over the window-sill and got upon the ladder,—at the same time that the voice of Mrs. Oxenden suddenly ceased to be heard from the opposite side of the door: though the excitement experienced by both the lovers prevented them from hearing the sounds of the unprincipled woman's rapidly retreating footsteps.

The crisis was now a serious one—for though Beverley was determined to defend Laura with his very life, if necessary, yet he likewise knew that his uncle had a numerous retinue of male dependants, and that he would not scruple to urge them to any deed of violence. However, by the joint assistance of her lover and the mountebank, Laura descended the ladder, and reached the ground in safety. Then away towards the post-chaise! But all in an instant the front door of the mansion opened—Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden rushed out first—a troop of men-servants ollowed next; and from a side-door three or four other male dependants rushed out, darting towards the road, and thus cutting off the progress of the fugitives. Beverley had caught up Laura in his arms, and was hastening with all his speed towards the post-chaise,—when he was seized upon by some of the old Baronet's myrmidons. Laura fainted. To have loosened his hold upon her, would have been to drop her upon the ground: but to retain her was to render himself powerless for defence. Supporting her, therefore, as well as he could on his left arm, he dealt such vigorous blows with his right as speedily to shake off his two foremost assailants: the mountebank ably assisted him; and the next instant Christian, whose ears had caught the disturbance, arrived upon the spot. Our young hero and the mountebank did all they possibly could to clear the way for Edgar's passage towards the post-chaise: they valorously sought to bring all the brunt of the conflict upon themselves: but a violent blow with a stout stick grasped by a sturdy footman, levelled Christian with the ground—the mountebank, perceiving that all was over, took to his heels and fled precipitately—Beverley and Laura were made prisoners.

"Bring them all into the house!" vociferated Sir John; "and as a magistrate will I deal with these ruffians. Mrs. Oxenden, take charge of your sister!"

These mandates were obeyed: the still insensible Laura was borne by Mrs. Oxenden and the negress (who in the meanwhile had come upon the spot) into the mansion—whither Edgar and Christian were likewise forcibly conducted.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE LAWYER.

OUR young hero had been stunned for a few moments by the severe blow he received: but he quickly recovered his consciousness, to find himself in the power of half-a-dozen stalwart and determined fellows—while a glance showed him that such was likewise the fate of his friend Beverley. The enterprise had therefore completely failed; and the aspect of affairs was even worse than before the adventure was undertaken. Beverley maintained a dignified silence,—he being determined to wait and see what course his uncle would have the hardihood to adopt: yet inwardly his feelings were those of the acutest disappointment and grief. As for Christian,—he likewise held his peace for the present; and his own sorrow at the failure of the enterprise was scarcely less poignant than that of his friend Beverley.

Sir John Steward, with a fierce triumph depicted upon his countenance, led the way into the dining-room, where he seated himself at the head of the table. Edgar and Christian were in the grasp of some seven or eight lacqueys and grooms; and they were of course powerless against the numerical strength of the enemy. Mrs. Oxenden was temporarily absent in charge of her sister.

"Now I intend," said Sir John Steward, "to investigate this matter magisterially, and without the slightest reference to my relationship with one of the prisoners——But surely," he ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting himself, "I have seen you before?"—and he fixed his eyes upon Christian.

"Yes," responded our hero, in a firm voice; "we met on the occasion when your intended victim was first brought by her infamous sister to your house."

"You impertinent young scoundrel!" exclaimed Sir John Steward, half springing from his seat in a furious rage; "how dare you make use of such terms as these?"

"This young gentleman," said Beverley, alluding to Christian, "is a friend of mine: and on his behalf I hurl back the term *scoundrel* in your teeth."

"Oh, oh! a pretty set of fellows we have got to deal with!" said Sir John Steward.

Here Mrs. Oxenden suddenly made her appearance; and as her eyes fell upon Christian Ashton, she instantaneously recognised him.

"I always suspected, sir," she said, with a fierce flashing of her dark eyes, and a scornful drawing-up of her fine person, "that you were some insolent meddler in affairs which did not concern you."

"To succour an innocent and virtuous young lady," responded our hero haughtily, "is a paramount duty on the part of even the veriest stranger. That duty I took upon myself; and if I have failed in the attempt, my own conscience will enable me to endure with pride and satisfaction any reproaches which *your* lips, madam, may fling out against me, or any punishment which Sir John Steward in his capacity as a magistrate may be enabled to inflict."

"Nobly spoken, my gallant young friend!" exclaimed Edgar Beverley; "and rest assured that though the cause of right and justice, truth and virtue, may suffer defeat,—yet that chastisement will sooner or later overtake the triumphant wrong-doers. Sir John Steward, I tell you to your face——"

"Silence, sir!" vociferated the Baronet. "Hold them fast, my worthy fellows—and we will presently see how these two moral-preaching upstarts will relish a condemnation to the county gaol. For here is downright burglary—violence—assault and battery—abduction——I don't know but that it amounts to—to——"

And the Baronet stopped short for want of some term to express a more heinous crime than any he had yet specified.

"This young man," said Mrs. Oxenden, intimating our hero, "forcibly stopped the negress and retained her for several minutes a prisoner in the road, close by the spot where a postchaise was in waiting."

"Coercion and intimidation!" vociferated Sir John; "almost highway robbery! I must make out the committal of these misdemeanants for six weeks as rogues and vagabonds——"

"Sir John Steward," interrupted Edgar Beverley, with a haughty indignation, "remember that I am an officer in the Queen's service——"

"And therefore," retorted the Baronet, "all the more completely bound to maintain law and order."

"You are determined to compel me to speak out," resumed Beverley, in the same haughtily indignant tone as before, and with corresponding looks. "Sir John Steward——"

"Silence!" again vociferated the old Baronet, waving his hand furiously. "I do not treat you as a nephew——I discard you—I disown you!"

"You were already prepared to do so," replied Edgar, drawing his tall form up proudly in the midst of his custodians, "before the incidents of this evening. Rest assured that I should feel myself but little flattered or complimented by being spoken of in the world as the relative of such as you! And now, Sir John Steward, you *shall* hear me. You may exercise your power tyrannously over my liberty: but you cannot place a gag between my lips. I accuse you of keeping a young lady within these walls against her will—I accuse you of contemplating the coercion of this young lady into a marriage which is loathsome and repugnant to her—I accuse you of leaguing and conniving with an infamous woman——"

"Sir John Steward," cried Mrs. Oxenden, her countenance livid with rage, "is this abominable language to be tolerated?"

"It is shocking," interjected Beverley, "that a man should be compelled to speak thus of a woman: but with *you*, Mrs. Oxenden, I consider myself bound to keep no terms and to be swayed by no fastidiousness. Let your friend Sir John Steward *dare* to pronounce a sentence of imprisonment against me and my generous-hearted companion, and I will unreservedly proclaim——"

But at this moment there was a loud knocking at the street-door,—which had been immediately preceded by the sounds of an equipage rolling up to the front of the mansion, although these sounds had passed unheard in the dining-room on account of the excitement of the scene.

"Who can this be?" ejaculated Sir John. "The present business must be suspended for a moment——I may be wanted——it is possible that it is some one for me. Keep the prisoners in secure custody——And I would advise *you*, Edgar, to retain a still tongue in your head if you wish me to show you any mercy."

Beverley flung a scornful look upon his uncle—but he made no verbal remark: he felt that he ought to do as much as he possibly could to procure the release of the young friend whose generous services on his behalf had involved him in the present dilemma. Sir John Steward issued from the room, accompanied by Mrs. Oxenden: Edgar and Christian remaining in the custody of the domestics.

As the Baronet and his female accomplice passed forth into the hall, a footman was just opening the front door and giving admittance to a middle-aged gentleman, from the side-pocket of whose overcoat peeped forth some parchments and other deeds. This was Mr. Andrews, the London attorney, whose arrival was not expected until the morrow. He was an active bustling individual—talked with great volubility—and though really of good manners, was nevertheless inclined to be somewhat too servilely obsequious towards his wealthy clients. He was not exactly an unprincipled person—he would not of his own accord perform a dishonest action: but he was what might be termed a sharp practitioner,—doing everything that the law allowed for the side that he espoused, and believing that it was perfectly consistent with the character of an honourable man to avail himself of whatsoever quirks and chicaneries might be evolved during the course of his professional proceedings.

Such was the attorney who now received a hearty welcome from Sir John Steward; and in a few rapidly uttered words Mr. Andrews explained how it was that he had come on the eve of the day when he was expected to arrive. The deeds were all finished—he found that there was a late train—and he thought that he might just as well run down from London at once, instead of waiting until the morrow, as he saw by the tenour of Sir John Steward's letters that he was anxious to get the business settled as soon as possible. Mr. Andrews was duly complimented by the Baronet for the zeal which he had thus displayed; and as he had come to take up his temporary quarters at Verner House, the vehicle which he had hired to bring him from the railway-station was at once dismissed. Having been introduced to Mrs. Oxenden, the lawyer was conducted to the drawing-room,—where the Baronet hastily explained to him the position of affairs in respect to Edgar Beverley and Christian. Mrs. Oxenden temporarily quitted the room in order to revisit her sister; and when the door closed behind her, the lawyer drew his chair nearer to that occupied by the Baronet,—at the same time observing, "This is a nasty business, Sir John—a very nasty business; and you must manage it with great delicacy. Pray excuse me: but——"

"What do you mean?" inquired the Baronet. "Is it all right about the deed breaking off the entail and thereby disinheriting my graceless nephew?"

"All right, my dear sir," responded the lawyer, with a smile half obsequious, half professionally significant. "It is amongst these papers here:"—and he pointed to the documents which lay before him upon the table.

"Then let me sign it at once!" exclaimed the old Baronet, in his greedy haste thus to avenge himself upon the nephew whom he detested.

"Softly—softly, Sir John!" said the lawyer. "With all due deference, the matter cannot be settled in such a railway speed. I am bound to read the document over to you——"

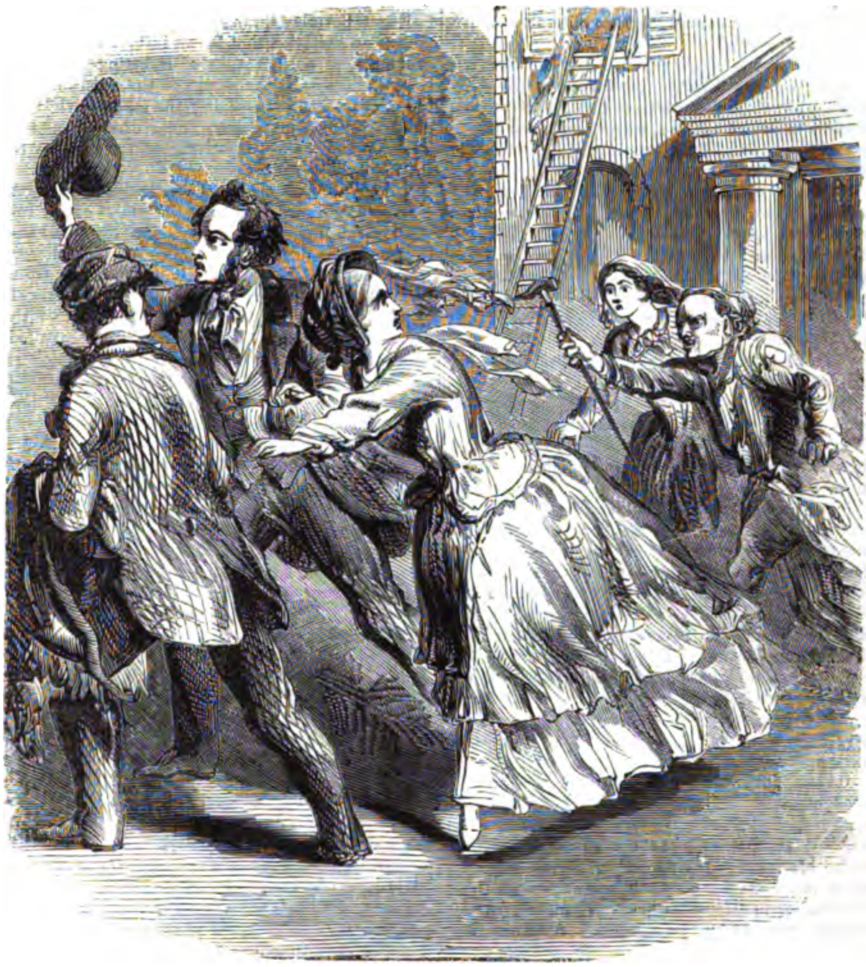
"Nonsense! nonsense!" ejaculated the Baronet. "We can dispense with all formalities——"

"But, my dear Sir John," again interposed the attorney—and it was with another obsequious smile,—"the document must be attested by competent witnesses. Now, pray listen to me. Here are all the deeds—marriage-settlements, draft of will, and everything that you have ordered: but *do* let them stand over until we have first discussed the affair which seems to press with the most importance."

"Well, well," said the Baronet, "no doubt you are right—and after all, something must be done at once in respect to this scapegrace of a nephew of mine and his friend."

"Pardon me for appearing to dictate, my dear Sir John," resumed Mr. Andrews; "but you really must not treat the matter magisterially. It would perhaps be all the better for me," he went on to observe with a chuckle; "because you would be certain to have actions for false imprisonment brought against you——"

"And what do I care?" exclaimed the Baronet: "I have the means of paying the damages."



"True, my dear sir," rejoined the lawyer: "but you have not the means of preventing the scandal. Excuse me—but, as you are aware,—though I never saw the lady until this evening—it is no secret to me that Mrs. Oxenden was your mistress some years ago: doubtless Mr. Beverley is equally sensible of this fact—and you know, my dear Sir John, it would not be pleasant if the world came to know that you had married the sister of your former paramour. Come, do be reasonable! You are a man of sound sense—of great intelligence—though a trifle hasty perhaps——and it would be well to treat this matter with prudence and policy."

"What course do you recommend?" asked the Baronet. "In plain terms, all I want to do is to keep this nephew of mine fast until after the marriage knot is tied: for between you and me, Andrews, I don't mind admitting that if I set him free to-night—and though it is settled that the beautiful Laura is to be mine before to-morrow's noon—yet in the meanwhile——"

"I understand, Sir John," interjected the lawyer: "your nephew is so desperately enamoured of the young lady that he would even set fire to the very house with the chance of being enabled to carry her off in the scramble. Well, well—but there is still a means of settling the affair amicably. What should you say to allowing your nephew five hundred a-year, if he would sign a paper renouncing all pretension to the hand of Miss Hall—and if he would immediately afterwards take himself off to join his regiment at Brighton? You were going to make the two-hundred a-year a permanent settlement: it is only flinging in three hundred more——and what is that to a man of wealth such as you are?"

"But of what earthly use," inquired the

Baronet petulantly, "is a document of the nature you mention? He may sign it as a stratagem to procure his freedom;—and the stupid adage is, you know, that all stratagems are allowable in love as well as in war."

"This is the use," rejoined Mr. Andrews:—"that you can display the document to Miss Hall—she will at once perceive that Mr. Beverley's worldly interests ride paramount over his love—and the natural pride of woman will induce her to discard him from her heart for ever."

"On my soul, this is capital!" ejaculated Sir John Steward, clutching at the idea the moment that it was fully expounded to him. "Why, my dear Andrews, you are as well versed in love-affairs as you are in those of the law. But what course do you mean to adopt?"

"Will you be guided by me, Sir John?" asked the attorney.

"To be sure! to be sure! You are managing matters so well——"

"Then let us have Mr. Beverley up here at once. He must be alone with us—the servants can wait outside the drawing-room door—and I dare say the windows are high enough to prevent an escape. Shall I ring the bell?"

Sir John Steward nodded an assent: the bell was rung—a servant answered the summons—the order was given—and in a couple of minutes Edgar Beverley was introduced to the drawing-room. The Baronet strove to render the expression of his countenance as sternly grave as possible, as he bade the domestics retire but wait on the landing outside: Edgar advanced into the room with a dignified demeanour, and took a seat some distance from the table.

"This gentleman," said Sir John Steward, "is Mr. Andrews, my solicitor—and he is desirous of having some little conversation with you."

"Then, as a gentleman versed in the law," at once observed Edgar, addressing himself to the attorney, "you will perhaps inform Sir John Steward that it may be dangerous to keep my friend Mr. Ashton any longer in the custody of a set of lacqueys: for what he has helped me to do—or rather to attempt—here this evening, can be justified by every principle of rectitude and honour."

"There will be no harm, Mr. Beverley," replied the solicitor, "in your friend remaining a few minutes longer in his present position, inasmuch as I hope that you will both very shortly go away together in freedom and in peace, as the result of the discourse I am about to hold with you."

"Proceed, sir," said Edgar, coldly.

"My dear sir," resumed Mr. Andrews, with a bland smile, "you cannot possibly entertain any animosity against me. If you do, I am sorry for it. But let us come to the point. This document, Mr. Beverley"—and he lifted the deed from the table as he spoke—"will have the effect, when duly signed by Sir John Steward, of breaking off the entail of his estates and enabling him to bequeath them to whomsoever he may think fit. You must therefore understand that inasmuch as you will henceforth have no prospective interest in your uncle's property, you become entirely dependent upon his bounty. But on his behalf, I offer to secure you the sum of five hundred a year, on condition that you now at once sign a paper which I in a few minutes will draw up, to the effect that you renounce all claim and pretension to the hand of Miss Hall."

Edgar Beverley sprang up from his seat in so violent an agitation that for an instant it appeared as if he were on the point of inflicting summary chastisement upon the person of the solicitor: but the next moment restraining the extreme violence of his feelings, he darted one withering glance upon his uncle, and then addressed the attorney in the following manner:—

"Your position, sir, as the mere hireling agent for another, secures you from the effects of my resentment. But hear me reject with scorn and indignation the base—the infamous proposal you have made me! As for receiving anything from what you have termed the bounty of my uncle, I should loathe myself were I to condescend to such despicable meanness. But when that falsely called bounty is offered as the price for a love which is above all price, no words are adequate for the expression of my disgust and indignation. And now I demand that I may at once be free to depart hence—my young companion likewise——or, by heaven! there shall be lives lost ere I am again overpowered!"

"Then, by heaven," exclaimed Sir John Steward, rising up from his seat in a paroxysm of ungovernable rage, "you shall see before you leave this house that I am thoroughly in earnest in disowning and disinheriting you——aye, by deed and by will!"

With these words, the Baronet rushed to the bell, which he rang violently; and on one of the domestics on the landing hastily answering the summons, the infuriate old man ordered that the butler and another upper-servant should be desired to attend in the drawing-room. Edgar sate unmoved; for though he had just now demanded his liberty, yet it was entirely on Christian's behalf: for he himself was by no means sorry to remain a little longer in the house, in the almost desperate hope that something would yet transpire in his favour. The butler and another upper-servant speedily made their appearance; and Sir John Steward, still in a towering rage, exclaimed with passionate vehemence, "I want you to witness a deed—a deed which my lawyer will now have the kindness to read over——a deed—a deed——But go on, Mr. Andrews!" added the Baronet with an oath.

The lawyer saw that any further remonstrance would be unavailing; and though after his journey from London, he would much sooner have sate down to a good supper, and then betaken himself to bed, he was nevertheless constrained through fear of displeasing the Baronet to commence the reading of the document. The butler and his fellow-servant listened with a sort of vacant bewilderment to the technical phrases, the endless circumlocutions, and the labyrinthine language of the deed: the Baronet sate with an expression of grim gloating triumph upon his countenance: Edgar Beverley was deliberating in his own mind what plan he could possibly adopt for the rescue of Laura—and so far from listening to the language of the document which was being read, he had no other sensation with regard to it than a continuous droning sound flowing upon his ear. At length, at the expiration of about twenty minutes, Mr.

Andrews ceased; and Sir John Steward, greedily snatching up a pen, exclaimed, "Now—now I will do that which is the first step towards cutting *you*, Edgar, off for ever—and then shall follow the signature of my will! You have got that deed also, Mr. Andrews—eh?"

Scarcely had the attorney answered the question in the affirmative, when the door was burst open, and Laura rushed into the room. The poor girl was like one demented: her hair was floating all dishevelled over her shoulders—her apparel was in disorder—it was even torn in two or three places: in a word, her whole appearance indicated the desperate struggle which she had made to escape from her sister and the negress. And Mrs. Oxenden herself showed signs of her frenzied efforts to hold the persecuted girl back: for she came rushing in with her own hair all disarranged, her toilet in disorder, and with fury flashing from her large dark eyes. All was confusion in a moment: the horrible negress followed Mrs. Oxenden into the room—some of the servants, likewise, from the landing—the butler and the other domestic who had been called as witnesses, sprang up from their seats—the lawyer seemed stricken with dismay—and Sir John Steward gave vent to a terrible imprecation. But Edgar Beverley, bounding forward, received Laura in his arms.

"Save me! save me!" she wildly shrieked forth: "for heaven's sake save me!"—and as she clung in frantic terror with her arms thrown round her lover's neck, she flung frightened glances over her shoulder at her sister and the negress.

"Give her up, Mr. Beverley!" cried Mrs. Oxenden, seizing upon her sister.

"No—never, never to *you*, vile profligate wretch that you are!" thundered forth the lieutenant, snatching the maiden violently from Mrs. Oxenden's grasp;—and holding the former as it were on one side, with his upraised right arm he protected her from another attack. "Dare not to lay a finger upon her!" he cried: "for I will strike indiscriminately!——Yes, by heaven! I will strike you down, woman though you be!"

"Seize upon her! seize upon that obstinate girl!" vociferated Sir John Steward, thus addressing himself to his dependants, and stamping his feet with rage. "A hundred guineas to be divided amongst you if you do my bidding!"

"No, no!" wildly shrieked forth Laura, as there was a general rush towards the spot where she clung so tenaciously to Edgar.

"Really my dear Sir John," interposed Mr. Andrews, "I am afraid——"

"Silence, sir!" thundered the Baronet: "it is my will that rules here!"

And so it did indeed too fatally seem; for what was Beverley's strength, encumbered as he was too by the very being he sought to defend, against the overwhelming power of numbers? Besides, he was constrained to limit his resistance within certain bounds for fear of injuring the now almost fainting girl; so that in less than a couple of minutes after the order had gone forth from the infuriate Sir John's lips, the lovers were separated—Beverley was again in the grasp of the domestics—Laura in the power of her sister and the negress.

The scene in that drawing-room was now fraught with a vivid and most varied interest. There stood the lieutenant, his garments torn—his countenance pale as death—his lips white and quivering—his chest heaving and falling with rapid pantings after the violence of the struggle and in the continued excitement of his own agitated feelings. On the other side of the same extremity of the apartment was Laura in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden and the negress: the poor girl had not absolutely swooned — but half dead with mingled distress and terror, she had sunk upon her knees, and her eyes were fixed in a sort of despairing bewilderment upon her lover. At the table Sir John Steward, with a diabolic expression of countenance, resumed the seat from which he had started; and the lawyer, bending over towards him, whispered, "For heaven's sake, do not carry all this too far!"

"Now," exclaimed the Baronet, not heeding the attorney's well-meant remonstrance, but giving free vent to his vindictive rage and his feelings of ferocious triumph, "instead of having a couple of witnesses to this document which disinherits my nephew, we will have a dozen. Look, Edgar! the pen is in my hand—the ink is in the pen—the deed is before me! At this instant you are my heir—the next moment, when my name is signed, you will have no more claim upon my property at my decease than the veriest stranger!"

"Do your worst!" ejaculated Beverley. "I call every one to witness that I care not the value of the very pen which you hold, for all the estates you possess! But it is the safety and happiness of this injured, outraged young lady——"

"Ah, but she shall become my bride in spite of you!" vociferated Sir John, who was perfectly mad with rage: "and this hand which is about to write the words that will leave you a beggar, shall hold *her's* at the nuptial ceremony!"

"Remember, Sir John," exclaimed Edgar, "that heaven at any moment can paralyze and wither the hand which is stretched forth to do injustice or mischief."

"Silence, wretch! I defy you!" vociferated the furious Baronet: and again dipping the pen deep down into the ink-stand, he was about to apply it to the foot of the disinheriting document.

But all in a moment, as he half raised himself up from his chair to lean the more conveniently over the table, he was seen to give a quick spasmodic start—the pen dropped from his hand, blotting the paper with ink—but in the twinkling of an eye the sable stains were mingled with sanguine ones: for the blood gushed forth from Sir John Steward's mouth—his head fell heavily for an instant upon the table—then his balance was lost—and he sank backward into the arm-chair. Cries of horror burst forth: the attorney and the butler hastened to his assistance—but he was past all human aid—in the madness of his fury he had broken a blood vessel—and it was a corpse that lay back in that chair!

Thus all in an instant the poor and humble lieutenant who was about to be disinherited—cast off—persecuted—and robbed of the maiden of his devoted love, became Sir Edgar Beverley and the possessor of immense wealth.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE YOUNG BARONET.

The scene was a frightful one: the sudden death of Sir John Steward, following with such awful quickness upon what thus proved to be a presaging warning on his nephew's part, struck all present with a sense of heaven's retribution. Edgar himself stood aghast—motionless—statue-like, though every hand which an instant before was upon him, fell as if palsied from its fierce ruffian grasp upon his garments. Laura sprang upright as if galvanized, and stood gazing for a few moments in wild horror upon the scene: then with a sudden and half-stifled shriek, she averted her looks—covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some object of horror—and sank almost fainting upon a chair. Mrs. Oxenden, half-stunned for nearly a minute, was transfixed to the spot,—her widely-open eyes staring upon the hideous scene as if she were in a fearful state of somnambulism: and then, suddenly startled to a sense of the change which had been wrought in the circumstances of Edgar Beverley, she turned towards her sister, murmuring, "For heaven's sake forgive me, my dearest Laura!"

But the young maiden, whose brain was in a whirl, had lost all sense of the relationship subsisting between them; and seeing in Mrs. Oxenden nothing more than a bitter enemy who a few minutes back had been mercilessly upbraiding and taunting her for her attempted flight,—the young damsel, we say, repulsed with horror the vile woman whose selfishness alone prompted a reconciliation.

Mrs. Oxenden fell back utterly discomfited; and Laura, obedient to a sudden impulse, sprang forward and was once more clasped in the arms of Edgar Beverley. This time there was no one who thought of separating the lovers: but still the young maiden clung to Edgar as if she were yet without a positive idea of safety.

The attorney saw that the new Baronet was in no condition of mind to issue such commands as were requisite under the circumstances; and he therefore undertook that duty himself.

"Remove the body of your late master—begone from the room, every one of you—let Mr. Ashton, who is a prisoner down-stairs, be immediately liberated—tell him what has occurred—and show him the way hither. As for *you*, vile wretch," he added, turning to the negress, "tramp!—and if you take yourself off from the mansion at once, there will be no harm done."

Then the lawyer's eyes settled sternly upon Mrs. Oxenden, as if he meant to issue the same imperious advice to her: but she looked as if she were about to sink down on the carpet in a fit; and Mr. Andrews left the words unspoken. The commands which he had uttered, were however promptly obeyed: the negress disappeared in affright—the corpse of the deceased Baronet was borne from the apartment—the document on which the blood gushed forth, was likewise removed—the posse of domestics withdrew—and in a few moments afterwards Christian Ashton entered the drawing-room.

"Laura, dearest Laura," exclaimed Sir Edgar Beverley, "give your hand in welcome to this, my best and dearest friend—the being whom next to yourself I must love the most sincerely! You have yet to learn the immensity of obligation which is due from us both to Mr. Ashton!"

The young maiden—who by this time had recovered a sufficiency of her self-possession, if not of positive mental composure, to understand that it was not all a dream, but a startling reality—at once gave her hand to our young hero, whom she then recognised as the same individual that had lent his succour when the accident occurred to the carriage. Christian's countenance was exceedingly pale: for the news of Sir John Steward's death had been communicated as abruptly as the incident itself had occurred; and much as he had loathed and abhorred the man, yet he could not remain unsusceptible of horror at his awful fate.

"You experience, my dear Ashton," said Beverley, "the same feeling as myself. I am shocked and appalled: but it would savour of the vilest hypocrisy to profess affliction for an occurrence which is heaven's retribution itself. This is now my mansion—and you, Ashton, are indeed a welcome guest!"

At that instant the young Baronet's eyes settled upon Mrs. Oxenden, who was advancing with the air of the humblest supplicant. A burning indignation sprang up to his countenance—his arm was already stretching forth to bid her avaunt—his lips were wreathing to form the word "Begone!"—when Laura, smitten with commiseration for the abject appearance of her lately imperious relative, murmured, "Remember, dearest Edgar, she is my sister!"

"True, said Beverley: and then he instantaneously recollected that his intended bride could not with decency remain beneath that roof unless in the companionship of a female relation. "Mrs. Oxenden," he went on to observe, "to say that I forgive you, is to proclaim as much as you can ever expect to hear from my lips: but you cannot suppose that friendship will exist between us. Remain here for the present—I do not consign your sister to your care—thank heaven, I am now in a position to befriend and protect her: but perhaps you will endeavour by your attentions to atone as much as possible for that past conduct which I will forbear from designating by terms as harsh as it merits."

Mrs. Oxenden took Laura's hand, and looked most plaintively in her face, as if to beseech her sympathy, her pardon, and the restoration of her love: but generous-hearted, magnanimous, as well as kindly gentle though the young maiden were, it was nevertheless impossible that she could in a moment put away from her recollection the sense of the bitter wrongs and persecution that she had experienced at the hands of her sister.

"I will not speak a reproachful word to you," she said in a low tremulous voice, while tears trickled down her cheeks: "but as for ever again being as we once were towards each other, I fear——"

Laura however left the remainder of the sentence unuttered; and as she still clung to her lover's arm, she was compelled to turn away from her sister, because Sir Edgar Beverley at the moment was about to address a few words to Mr. Andrews.

"I bear no animosity, sir, against you," he said; "because I am well aware that you have only performed your professional duty; and moreover I have not forgotten that you flung in a word or two with the hope of checking the savage impetuosity of my deceased uncle. If it suit your other engagements, I beg that you will remain here for the present, to superintend the arrangements for the funeral, and to give me all requisite information with regard to a property which I have inherited so abruptly and with which I am so little acquainted."

The lawyer bowed an assent to the proposal; and then said, "Does it suit you, Sir Edgar, that I should issue on your behalf any instructions with reference to those varlets who treated yourself and your friend so roughly?"

"No—let nothing be changed until the funeral shall have taken place," rejoined Sir Edgar Beverley.

Shortly afterwards the inmates of Verner House separated to their respective chambers; and on the following morning instructions were given with respect to the funeral. Christian at the same time proceeded into Ramsgate, where he inquired for the friendly mountebank: and he found him at his lodging in the obscure court. The news of Sir John Steward's death had not reached the man's ears; and he could scarcely believe his own senses when he thus received the intelligence from our young hero.

"I hope, sir, you do not take me for a coward," he said, "that I ran away so precipitately last night——"

"Such is not the impression of Sir Edgar Beverley or myself," interrupted our hero: "for you bore your part well until you saw that all was lost; and we could not expect you to peril your own safety any farther. I come to you thus early, for fear lest you should be thinking of a retreat from the town. Sir Edgar Beverley has sent you a small testimonial of his gratitude: and should circumstances ever transpire to render the services of a friend needful, you must not hesitate to apply to the Baronet."

With these words Christian placed a purse in the hands of the mountebank, and then hurried away. When the itinerant came to examine the contents of that purse, he found himself possessed of a little fortune of twenty guineas; so that the whole court rang with the joyous "hurrah!" which burst from his lips; and all the inhabitants of the said court were in a moment electrified as well as amazingly edified by the extraordinary antics which he began to perform.

Our young hero next proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where he liquidated Sir Edgar Beverley's account, and availed himself of the temporary absence of the landlord to settle his own: for be it borne in mind that the generous-hearted proprietor of the establishment had invited him to remain there as long as he thought fit, free of all charge. This was however a license which Christian's natural pride would not suffer him to use: and he therefore liquidated his own score with liberality. He ordered the trunks to be forwarded to Verner House; and having thus transacted his business in the town, returned to that mansion. Nothing more worth special notice occurred during that day; and it was at a somewhat early hour in the evening that the inmates withdrew to their respective chambers; for there was a general sense of weariness after the varied and thrilling incidents of the preceding night.

Christian had been perhaps about half-an-hour in his own room, and was yet but partially undressed,—for he had been sitting down to reflect on all those circumstances in which he had become so mixed up,—when the door slowly opened and Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. She had completely disapparelled herself of her day-costume, and was now attired in the simplest *negligée*: a muslin wrapper was thrown so loosely around her that it revealed far more of her really superb neck and bosom than was consistent with modesty; and yet there was an utter absence of any indication to prove a studied voluptuous display on her part. Indeed, it all had so natural an air that it appeared as if in the excitement of her feelings she had hurriedly slipped on that muslin wrapper without reference to the closing of its folds in decent propriety. The luxuriant masses of her raven hair fell in heavy tresses upon her admirably sloping shoulders; and the band which circled her waist just drew in the wrapper sufficiently to develope the well-proportioned symmetry of her shape. Her naked feet had been thrust into slippers; and her well-formed ankles, white and well rounded, but of shapely slenderness, glanced beneath the skirt of her dress. Immediately upon making her appearance, she placed her forefinger upon her lip to enjoin silence; and then she closed the door. Christian's countenance flashed with mingled surprise and indignation: he was about to bid her begone, when she conveyed to him that indication of silence; and therefore the word to which he was on the point of giving utterance remained unspoken.

"You are surprised—perhaps you are shocked, Mr. Ashton, at this proceeding on my part," began Mrs. Oxenden, her looks expressing the most languishing entreaty as she accosted our young hero: "but I beseech you to hear me with patience."

"It were well, madam," he coldly responded, "if you had chosen a more suitable time and place for any communication which you may have to make me:"—and he glanced significantly towards the door.

"Mr. Ashton, I am the most miserable of women!" quickly resumed Mrs. Oxenden, with a look and tone of passionate entreaty. "I implore you to listen to me!"

"Not here—not now!" ejaculated Christian. "I insist that you leave me!"

"I cannot—I will not!" she rejoined, as if she were half frenzied. "Ever since your return from the town in the forenoon, I have endeavoured to find an opportunity to speak to you alone—but you would not afford it to me—you seemed to conjecture my object and purposely to avoid me."

"It may be that I did so," answered Christian: "but if you have really anything to say to me, you must postpone it to the morrow, when I will not refuse you the opportunity. But to-night—and here——No, it is impossible!—and you do your cause no good, Mrs. Oxenden, by coming to me in such circumstances. I now insist that you leave me."

She turned away from our hero for an instant as if about to seek the door,—when suddenly bending her looks upon him again, she said with so peculiar an expression of countenance that it well suited the words she uttered. "Yes—I will leave you!—but it will be to quit the house likewise—the sea flows at no great distance beneath the cliffs—and it is deep enough to engulph even a miserable woman who has no longer any reason to cumber this world with her presence!"

"Wretched creature, what do you mean?" exclaimed our hero, clutching her by the wrist as she appeared about to retreat precipitately from the chamber. "Would you to your other misdeeds add the still greater one of suicide? would you crown all your past iniquities by so heinous a crime as this? No! rather study to repent of whatsoever evil you may have done; and at least by your future conduct make such atonement as lies in your power."

"But if every one looks coldly upon me—if every one seems to scorn and revile me," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, with a tone and look that seemed to express mingled anguish and bitterness—"wherefore should I remain upon earth?"

"That persons look coldly upon you," replied Christian, "is scarcely to be wondered at, as your own conscience must but too faithfully tell you. But that you have been reviled, I do not believe——"

"Nevertheless it is true!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden vehemently. "The day which has just drawn to a close, has been for me one prolonged agony. If I have encountered a domestic upon the stairs, he has flung at me some taunt—because they all look upon me as the instigatrix and the cause of the deceased Baronet's conduct—a conduct in which they were more or less implicated, and which they know full well will shortly lead to their dismissal. Just now the maid-servants whom I summoned to assist at my night toilet, flung insults at me——"

"Can all this be indeed true?" asked Christian, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

"It is true!" responded Mrs. Oxenden, the tears trickling down her cheeks, and her half-naked bosom heaving with convulsing sobs. "Oh, it is true!—and it is more than I can bear!"

"But Sir Edgar Beverley," replied our hero quickly, "is ignorant of this—and not for a moment would he permit it. Whatever you may have been—whatever you may have done—so long as by his sanction you remain beneath his roof it is not for these menials to insult or taunt you—they who were themselves the too ready instruments of their vile master——though heaven forgive me for speaking thus strongly against him now that he is gone!"

"Can you wonder that I am excited? can you wonder that I am frenzied—that I am half mad?" asked Mrs. Oxenden, speaking with vehement rapidity. "My sister looks coldly upon me—Sir Edgar addresses me in monosyllables—you avoid me—Mr. Andrews displays a freezing politeness, which in itself is worse than downright rudeness—the domestics taunt me—and then this evening the maid-servants boldly refuse to obey me: so that well-nigh driven to madness, I resolved to fly to you! And then too," she added, in a tone that suddenly became soft and languishing, "there was another reason——"

"Listen, Mrs. Oxenden!" interrupted our hero. "You are safe from farther insult for the remainder of this night: I will take the earliest opportunity to-morrow morning to speak to Sir Edgar. And now leave me!"

For an instant Mrs. Oxenden bit her lip with vexation. She had studiously arrayed herself in that meretricious manner in the hope of exercising the influence of her charms upon our hero's passions: she had succeeded in drawing him into conversation, and in already remaining for ten minutes in his room, despite his first peremptory command that she should retire: it was true that he had spoken to her with averted countenance, and that not for a single instant had his eyes lingered upon her voluptuously exposed charms: but still she had flattered herself that she had obtained a sufficient footing in that chamber to give promise of success in the design which she had formed,—when all in a moment he had cut her short and once more peremptorily bidden her begone! Thus was it that for an instant she bit her lip with vexation: but the next moment regaining complete controul over herself, she resolved to return to her siege-batteries and play off the artillery of her charms and wiles on points which she hoped would be more vulnerable and sensitive. Her first aim had been to appeal to his magnanimous sympathy by an exaggeration of some few little slights which she had received at the hands of the domestics; and artfully cunning as she was, she knew that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, for a beautiful woman to engage a man's compassion was already going far towards conquering him completely.

"You bid me quit you chamber, Mr. Ashton," she said, "in a tone which corresponds but indifferently with the generosity of the remarks you had previously made, and with the magnanimity of the feeling you displayed towards me. You have heard me thus far: you must hear me on to the end!"

"Mrs. Oxenden, I insist upon your leaving me!" exclaimed Christian, in whose mind suspicions of a sinister purpose on her part were engendered by the pertinacity with which she lingered in his chamber. "This is most indecent—most indecorous! If you have a woman's shame or pride——"

"Oh, now *you* revile and taunt me likewise—wretched, wretched woman that I am!"—and weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break, she threw herself with every appearance of frantic distress upon the nearest chair.

"I entreat—I conjure that you will tranquillise yourself!" said Christian, bewildered whether to give her credit for the most genuine sincerity, or to behold in her conduct the confirmation of his former suspicion. "These sounds of affliction will be heard—and what will be thought——"

"Oh, speak not unkindly to me!" murmured the wily woman: and as if quite unconscious of of her actions, she still further disarranged her dress—so that all the voluptuous contours of her bust were completely exposed.

"Madam," said Christian indignantly, "leave me this moment—or I myself will seek another chamber—and to-morrow morning will proclaim wherefore I did so!"

"Cruel, cruel!" murmured Mrs. Oxenden,—"and I who love you madly—I who have been smitten with an irresistible passion—I who, notwithstanding your coldness, have a heart that burns with fervour for you——"

For a moment Christian Ashton was so completely stupefied by these words that he was transfixed to the spot and rendered speechless. The next instant Mrs. Oxenden's arms were wound about his neck—she strained him to her bosom—she pressed her lips to his cheek; and then another instant, and with an effort the violence of which when exercised towards a female, could only be justified by the peculiarity of the circumstances, our young hero disengaged himself from her embrace. Mrs. Oxenden,—who was not to be so easily subdued, and who was really inspired with passion on account of the youth's personal beauty, as well as influenced by policy in her endeavour to gain over Sir Edgar Beverley's intimate friend,—despaired not of success. Her arts and wiles were to be redoubled in order to secure her triumph. Such was her thought: and falling upon her knees, she stretched forth her arms towards Christian, exclaiming, "Cruel youth! Why thus spurn a woman who is dying for you? Am I repulsive?—on the contrary, am I not beautiful?"

"Will you leave me?" demanded Christian vehemently: for he was determined that the scene should end that instant.

"No, no—I will not!—and you cannot be so cruel——"

Our young hero waited to hear no more: but driven almost to his wit's end, he snatched one of the wax-lights from the mantel-piece and hurried from the room. Mrs. Oxenden—whose own sensuous temperament, vicious disposition, and long career of immorality, had hitherto rendered her incredulous in respect to the existence of virtue in others, and who believed that at least every man was "in his heart a rake" (thus reversing as to sex Pope's memorable assertion), was astounded at Christian's abrupt disappearance: and it was now *her* turn to remain stupefied and transfixed on the spot.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE NEGRESS.

THE chamber which our hero had just left, was situated in a passage whence communicated the doors of several other sleeping-apartments, which he knew to be unoccupied. Into the first of these did he therefore plunge: but he closed the door with such rapidity that the current of air thus produced, extinguished the candle. Between the openings of the window-draperies the brightness of the night shone with sufficient clearness to show him at a glance that the bed was untenanted, as he had expected to find it: and he lost not a moment in locking the door, so as to prevent the intrusion of Mrs. Oxenden.

He threw himself upon the bed, and began to reflect upon everything that had just occurred. That she had purposed to play off the artillery of her wiles upon him, and ensnare him into an amour, he could not possibly doubt: and he had therefore no difficulty in conjecturing her motives. There was her passion to gratify—and there were her interests to be served. At any time, and under any circumstances, he would have loathed the woman who could have thus meretriciously sought to throw herself into the arms of a comparative stranger who had given her not the slightest encouragement: but his abhorrence was unspeakably enhanced when he reflected that it was in the house of death that Mrs. Oxenden had thus given way to the influence of her passions and to the current of her worldly interests,—in a house too, beneath the roof of which her own innocent sister was reposing—and at a time when only twenty-four hours had elapsed since this self-same mansion had proved the scene of a frightful tragedy. Yes: our hero experienced the deepest loathing—the intensest abhorrence—for that unprincipled and unscrupulous woman; and he resolved to communicate everything to Sir Edgar Beverley in the morning.

He lay thus reflecting for perhaps a quarter of an hour, when he thought that he might just as well disapparel himself completely (for he was only half undressed) and retire to rest. This he accordingly did: but when he had entered the couch on which he had been previously lying, it was still some time ere slumber began to steal upon his eyes. He was just in that state when the senses are rocking themselves—or rather sinking into the dreamy repose which is the last stage preceding the oblivion of profound slumber: his breathing was slow and regular, as if he already slept completely: so that any one might imagine he did really thus sleep. And now it was that he became aware of some sound which, though slight, brought him back in a moment to full wakefulness. He did not however move: he lay perfectly still—and listened. The handle of the door was evidently turning; and then there was the sound as if some one were endeavouring to push or pull it open. Christian's first thought was that Mrs. Oxenden was trying the door: but he knew full well that she could not enter—for he had locked it, as already observed. But, ah! what sound was it which next met his ear? The key itself was turning in the lock; and this could not be effected by any one on the outside of the door—the individual must be in the room itself. He started up: the extremity of the chamber where the door was situated, was involved in almost complete obscurity: yet through the gloom he could distinguish some shape—a human one. He had no superstitious terror: he sprang from the bed—there was a half-stifled cry, or rather shriek, from the lips of the person who was endeavouring to open the door: at the same moment Christian's hands clutched her garments—for she was a female; and she fell upon her knees, beseeching his mercy. This woman was the negress.

"Silence!" ejaculated Christian: "I will do you no harm. Remain quiet for a moment."

Locking the door again, he drew forth the key to prevent her escape until he had questioned her: and then he proceeded to huddle on a portion of his clothing.

"Now," he said, "will you tell me what you are doing here"

"The new master," replied the negress, alluding to Sir Edgar Beverley, "or rather that gentleman the lawyer, who spoke for him last night, ordered me to leave the house: but I could not—where was I to go? Besides, I hoped that I should be forgiven: so I concealed myself in this room, where I remained all day without a morsel of food. I went down stairs just now to the pantry to get some: I came up again: but scarcely had I been five minutes in the chamber, when the door opened suddenly——I had forgotten to lock it as I intended to do——and some one rushed in. The light went out so quickly that I could not see who it was; and I thought I had better stay quiet until whoever it might be should fall asleep. I fancied that you slept, sir—and was going to leave the chamber with as little noise as possible——"

"Well, well, I know the rest," observed Christian—and then for a few moments he deliberated with himself what he should do: but remembering that it was impossible to turn a woman out of the house at that hour of the night—indeed, being incapable of such an act of cruelty, no matter how well it might suit her deserts—he was about to tell her to seek another apartment, when the thought struck him that her secret presence in the mansion despite of Mr. Andrews' peremptory order to quit it, might have some ulterior motive beyond that which she had alleged. He therefore said, "You tell me you had nowhere to go? How long had you been employed in the late Sir John Steward's service?"

"About seven years," replied the woman: and we should observe that she spoke in broken English and execrable grammar—but we do not feel disposed to give any verbal representation of her diction.

"Your duties, if I guess aright," said our hero, "can have been but little creditable to yourself, considering the master whom you served: and such duties are always well remunerated. You must therefore have amassed gold—and yet you will endeavour to make me believe that you are completely pauperised, without the means of providing yourself with a lodging. How do you account for this inconsistency?"

"I do not altogether understand you," said the negress. "I am a stranger in your country——"

"A stranger indeed!—and you have been seven years in Sir John Steward's service!" exclaimed Christian,—"a time sufficient to render you familiar enough with the meaning of our language—and an employment which was only too well calculated to enlarge your experiences. Come, speak frankly: the season for artifice and disguise has gone by—you will do yourself no good by attempting to deceive me."

As Christian thus spoke he strained his eyes hard to study the countenance of the negress in the gloom of that part of the chamber where they stood: but he could not distinguish any of her features except her eyes. She remained silent; but he could judge that her feelings were those of uneasiness, inasmuch as she fidgetted nervously. His former suspicions were strengthened: indeed they amounted to the conviction that the woman had not truthfully explained the cause of her presence in the house.

"Now," he said, "understand me if you can or will:"—and he spoke with stern decision. "You are here for no good purpose; and if you do not give me the most satisfactory explanation, I shall take measures to detain you for the rest of the night, and to-morrow you will be handed over to the care of a constable. Do you comprehend me?"

"Yes. Pray let me go, sir!" said the woman in a voice of entreaty.

"Ah! now I am more than ever convinced that you are full of treachery and deceit," exclaimed Christian; "and you must speak out. Again will I endeavour to make myself properly understood by you. Deal with me frankly,—and as much mercy shall be shown you as can be displayed under such circumstances as may transpire from the revelations you are about to make: but if on the other hand you persist in refusing explanations, then be not astonished if you find yourself severely treated."

This speech was followed by a silence of nearly a minute—during which the negress was evidently deliberating with herself what course she should adopt. At length she said, hesitatingly and timidly, "What if I was to tell you a secret—a very great secret, Mr. Ashton?"

"Rest assured that it will be all the better for you," responded our hero. "Come—let me put a leading question or two. Mrs. Oxenden knows of your secret presence in the house?"

"No, sir: on my soul she does not!" answered the negress emphatically.

"She does not?" said Christian. "Then why are you here? Once for all tell me: for I am growing impatient. This secret of your's——"

"Will take a long time to explain, sir: and if you have no patience," added the negress, "it will be useless——"

"Plenty of patience if you will only come to the point," interrupted our hero. "It is by no means the most agreeable thing to stand here conversing in the dark——especially," he thought within himself, suddenly leaving off speaking aloud, "as I cannot see your black visage and judge of whether you are trifling with me or not. But come," he added, again addressing himself audibly to the negress; "here are a couple of chairs within the sphere of the moonlight: let us sit down and converse—and you shall tell me this secret of your's."

"Well, I may as well—indeed I must under all circumstances!" muttered the negress: and she suffered herself to be led forward to a chair near the toilet-table which stood against one of the windows of the room,—Christian himself taking another, so that he exactly faced her.

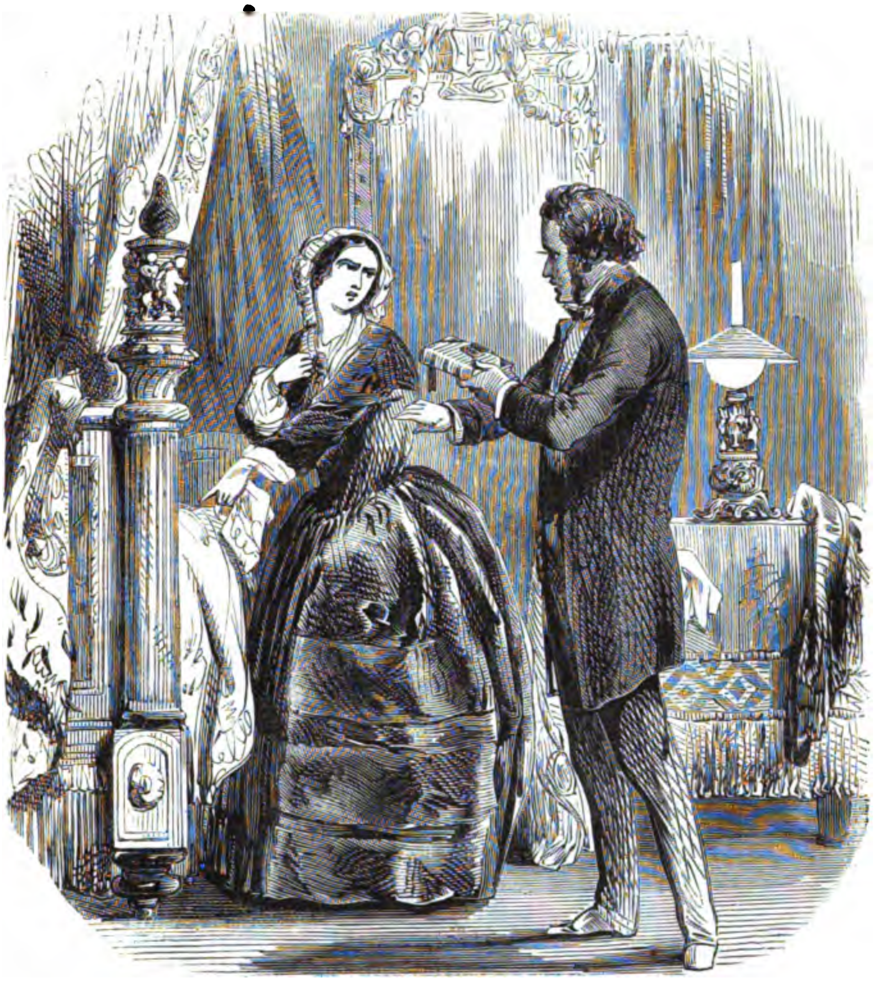
"Now," he said," "I am all attention."

"Perhaps you know, sir," resumed the negress, —"or perhaps you do *not*—in which case I must tell you—that when I first came into Sir John Steward's service, between seven and eight years ago, the masons and bricklayers were altering and repairing this house. Sir John did not habitually live here then—but chiefly in London: but I was put here, along with another woman, to get the house in readiness and set everything to rights, as the masons were just finishing their work."

"And what on earth," ejaculated Christian, "has all this to do with your presence here to-night? Beware how you trifle with me!"

"I told you, sir, that the tale would be rather a long one," answered the negress; "and if you are already impatient——"

"I was wrong," interposed our hero. "Continue in your own way."



"Well, sir," resumed the black woman, "I must tell you that those masons and bricklayers were all sent down from London to do the work; and the moment it was finished they went away, liberally rewarded. And no wonder!—for there is a secret connected with the house which I am now going to explain. It is so contrived that there is a room the existence of which no one suspects who does not already know that secret—and it is reached by a means of communication so cunningly and craftily devised, that a person might live a dozen years in the mansion without entertaining the remotest idea of all these mysteries."

"This sounds most strange!" said Christian. "How is it possible that such space can be taken up inside a house without the fact being suspected?"

"The secret room," continued the negress, "is very long but very narrow: it is a sort of slip taken off the passage lengthways, on the next storey—the one up above, I mean. It is lighted by a window in the roof; and a very narrow staircase is the means of reaching it. The walls are so thick, or else so well contrived by the masons who made the place, that no one in the adjoining chambers on the one side, or in the passage on the other, could possibly overhear anything that took place in that chamber. The sky-light on the roof has a double casement; and this likewise deadens all sound from within. The whole arrangement is as curious as it is clever: for there are devices to maintain a healthful supply of fresh air. In a word, the place must have cost Sir John Steward a great deal of money."

"And now that you have finished the romance of your story," said Christian, who did not believe a syllable of all that had just been told him, though he could not for the life of him conjecture why the negress should be devising such a narrative,—"you will perhaps tell me for what uses the mysterious room served?"

"I suppose I need not inform you, sir," continued the black woman, who did not perceive by our hero's tone how her veracity was suspected, "that Sir John Steward was a very gay gentleman, and that many a young girl has fallen his victim?"

"I have indeed heard enough," responded Christian, "to convince me that here at least you are speaking nothing but the truth. But that secret apartment——"

"Often served, sir," rejoined the negress, "as a place of imprisonment for some lovely creature who fell into the snare set for her, or was carried off by violence. Only conceive a young woman brought into this house and consigned to a room like any other—this one, for instance,—falling off fast asleep, when, worn out with fatigue and perhaps with grief, she had taken some refreshment—for Sir John knew well enough how to drug even tea or coffee—and then awaking to find herself in a living tomb from which it was told her she would never be allowed to go forth until she complied with his desires ——"

"Good heaven! is this possible?" exclaimed Christian, his incredulity vanishing, and his interest in the black woman's tale becoming all the more fearfully vivid as it seemed suddenly to be stamped with truthfulness.

"It is quite possible, sir, because I have seen it over and over again with my own eyes."

"And perhaps, accursed hag! you yourself have aided in all those black satanic villanies?"

"There, sir!—what mercy have I to expect," asked the trembling negress, "at your hands, when you burst out upon me in this way?"

"Go on—go on," said Christian, mastering his burning indignation as well as he was able. "I will interrupt you no more—if I can help it."

"Well, sir, I must trust to your goodness," continued the black woman. "As I have already hinted, there has been many and many a victim in that dreadful place; and then, when innocence turned into dishonour and degradation, there was either an anxiety to screen it all on the part of the sufferer—or else, when once lost, she accepted her position of an established mistress—and when cast off, retired with a goodly pension: so that what with one way or another, the secret of that mysterious chamber was never betrayed. And let me tell you, sir, that the device was infallible; for the poor victim, however virtuously inclined, and however strenuously she resisted at first, always succumbed at last, when either worn out in spirit—exhausted—half-maddened—or reduced to desperation!"

Christian was about to give vent to another outburst of his feelings: but he controlled himself, and suffered the negress to proceed.

"Of all the servants of the house," she continued, "myself and the woman of whom I have spoken, alone knew the secret of the mysterious chamber. That woman died about a year back: and thus the secret remained with me—for there was no one else in the establishment to whom Sir John thought fit to confide it. However, he and I sufficed to bear up to that room any drugged and insensible victim——"

"And you, I suppose," said Christian, scarcely able to repress the indignant bitterness of his feelings or prevent them from showing themselves in his accents,—"you, I suppose, were the attendant upon these unfortunate victims of a hideous lust—you witnessed their tears—you turned a deaf ear to their prayers—perhaps you used threats—— But go on, go on—and let me know to what issue your narrative of abominations is tending."

"A few days ago, sir," continued the negress, "in the middle of the very night before Mrs. Oxenden arrived from Brighton on her second visit——"

"You mean when she brought her sister Laura hither?" said Christian inquiringly.

"Exactly so, sir. In the middle of that night, a certain well-known signal was given, by the pulling of a particular bell at the front door, but which bell rang in Sir John's room. He speedily got up, and came to summon me. I knew what it meant: the thing had often and often happened before. We went down to the front door—and received a beautiful young creature from the care of a couple of women and a man who had carried her off by force from some place, I don't know where, and brought her down to Verner House."

"And those wretches, I presume," said Christian, "were the infamous agents who pandered to Sir John Steward's lusts, and whom he doubtless kept continually in his pay?"

"Just so, sir," answered the negress. "They had a roving commission, if I may use the term, empowering them to pick up beauties wherever they could find them, and bring them straight to Verner House. No matter the distance, they might take post-chaises for hundreds of miles—they knew perfectly well that Sir John would pay for them liberally, as well as all their other expenses——"

"No doubt!" observed Christian. "But about this beautiful girl of whom you are speaking?"

"She was in a dead swoon, sir, when delivered into our hands," answered the negress: "for it seems she had been brought a good many, many miles—and she was worn out with fatigue and grief. Everything was done silently and cautiously as usual; but there was no need to drug whatsoever refreshments she stood in need of—for, as I tell you, she was in a swoon—and we took her right up to the secret chamber. Sir John was terribly vexed——"

"Vexed! And why?" asked Christian, astonished at such a remark. "How could he be vexed?—why was it?"

"Because he expected Mrs. Oxenden and her sister next day," replied the negress: "he meant to marry the sister, as you already know—and therefore the presence of the new beauty in the secret chamber was an embarrassment and an encumbrance rather than a source of hope and delight."

"Then why did he receive her at all?" asked Christian, fancying that he discerned an inconsistency in the black woman's tale.

"Because the agents who had brought her could not possibly take her back," responded the negress: "and because, under those circumstances, Sir John made up his mind that he would keep her here until after his marriage with Miss Hall, when it was to be my duty to restore her to freedom,—first binding her by the most fearful of oaths that she would never betray the place to which she had been brought. And then, too, I was to make it appear that I risked everything by conniving at her escape, and that I must throw myself upon her gratitude for keeping the secret. Or if the worst should have happened, Sir John could easily have gone on the Continent with his young bride Laura, whom he hoped to possess—until everything was blown over. Such was the plan, Mr. Ashton: but as you perceive, death has made a wonderful change in the house——"

"And the old man possessed *not* his intended bride," remarked Christian solemnly; "and the hand of heaven itself interposed to prevent that hideous sacrifice. But this young lady of whom you are speaking——"

"My tale will soon be ended," rejoined the negress. "A few hours back I communicated to the young lady that when night came I would restore her to freedom; and—and—it was my intention to fulfil this promise just now—indeed I was on the point of ascertaining if the house were all quiet, when you so suddenly burst into the room——"

"This room?" ejaculated Christian: "Then, it was a falsehood that you were stealing forth to visit the pantry to procure food?"

"Yes, sir—it certainly was not the truth," answered the negress: "but I am telling you all the truth now——"

"And you must convince me of it!" rejoined our young hero. "I will see this young lady—she shall be restored to freedom—she must be made acquainted with all that has taken place——"

"I have told her, sir," interrupted the negress, "that she has nothing more to fear—that Sir John Steward is dead—that a new Baronet is in possession of the house——and I offered to do everything I could to see her to some place of safety, or provide her with a post-chaise to take her home——"

"And where does she live? and what is her name? Who is she?" demanded Christian.

"I know not, sir," replied the negress: "she mistrusts me—she will not give me her confidence—she will tell me nothing——"

"And no wonder!" observed our hero. "But why take measures to effect her egress so secretly from the house? why not, when Sir John Steward was smitten down by the hand of death—why not, I ask, have at once given this poor persecuted young lady her liberty?"

"Ah! Mr. Ashton," said the negress, "do you not understand how embittered Sir Edgar Beverley and that lawyer are against me?—and would they not have immediately sent me to prison as the accomplice of the late Baronet in keeping this young lady in custody? So I thought I would at least get her quietly out of the house—and then, to tell you the truth, I might shift for myself. You see how candidly I am speaking—I hope you will take it all into account——"

"You have been a very wicked woman," interrupted Christian; "but I do not hesitate to promise that you shall be suffered to depart with impunity, provided that no additional circumstances transpire to stamp you with any deeper iniquity than that which you have confessed. But now let us conclude the business as speedily as possible. You have yet to explain your presence in this room—concealed here all in the dark——"

"A few words will make you acquainted with everything, sir," resumed the negress. "The secret entrance to the staircase leading to the prison-chamber is in this room. I had just emerged thence at the moment when you burst in; and if your candle had not so suddenly gone out, you must have seen me. I dared not move—I kept in the deep shade of that recess, until I fancied you were asleep; and then I endeavoured to leave the chamber stealthily, with the intention of hiding myself in some unoccupied apartment until a more favourable opportunity should present itself for the liberation of the young lady."

"But if the secret entrance to the staircase is in *this* room," said Christian, "why did you not beat a retreat——"

"Look, sir!" ejaculated the negress: and rising from her chair, she passed towards the recess to which she had just now alluded.

A sharp click—evidently the action of some secret spring—fell upon Christian's ear; and the next moment a strong light threw its rays into the chamber. This occurred with such magical suddenness, and the hideous form of the negress was so abruptly thrown out into strong relief—the light itself flashed with such lightning celerity upon our young hero's eyes—that he started and could scarcely repress an ejaculation of wonderment mingled even with a transient terror. He perceived that a door had opened in the wall, and that on the foot of a staircase which was thus revealed within, a lamp was standing. It was a lamp with a globe of ground glass;—it was of moderate size too, such as is used for a small parlour; and the negress had evidently left it there to light herself up again on her intended return to the secret chamber.

"If I had opened this door, sir," she said to Christian, "at the instant you burst into the room, you would of course have seen it; and if I had done so when you were in bed, there was the probability of the light flashing upon your eyes and awakening you."

"True!" observed our hero: then, having hastily huddled on all the rest of his garments, he said, "And now take that lamp and lead the way."

The negress did as she was ordered—and conducted Christian up a very narrow staircase, the walls of which were wainscotted; and at the top she halted for a moment to draw back the bolt of a door covered with green baize. As this door swung open outwardly, Christian perceived that it was of great thickness; and there was an inner door, also covered with baize, and which opened inward—so that it was but too evident that every precaution had been taken to render the secret chamber a veritable living tomb,—the walls, doors, and skylights of which should beat back every sound of grief, despair, or anguish which might emanate from the lips of whomsoever Sir John Steward's lustful iniquity rendered a captive there.

The inner door swung open; and the negress, as she thus passed into the room, said, "Fear not, young lady—this gentleman comes for a friendly purpose."

The next instant Christian Ashton crossed the threshold and entered the chamber: ejaculations of mingled joy and astonishment burst from the lips of both himself and the young lady who was a captive there; and the next moment they were clasped in each other's arms.

"Dearest Christian!"

"Dearest, dearest Isabella!"

And to both did it all appear to be a dream.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

ISABELLA AT VERNER HOUSE.

THE negress was transfixed with a perfect bewilderment on thus perceiving that our handsome young hero and that beautiful dark-eyed girl were so far from being strangers to each other that they must be either lovers or else brother and sister: but by the fond endearing words which the youth lavished upon the charming Isabella, the black woman was speedily convinced that the former suspicion was the correct one—namely, that they were lovers.

Isabella was dressed in deep mourning, which she wore for the death of her uncle the Earl of Lascelles; and though the animation of joy was now upon her countenance, and a kindred light was beaming in her swimming eyes, yet had Christian seen her when seated by herself just before she thus flew into his arms, he would with pain and sorrow have observed that she was pale and careworn. Oh! with what rapture did he strain her to his breast; and with what fond confiding love did the beauteous maiden receive and give back his caresses, and then cling to his arm,—looking up with affectionate gratitude into his countenance as that of not only her lover, but her deliverer!

"Dearest, dearest Isabella," said Christian, "you have now nothing more to fear—you will find yourself amongst friends beneath this roof where hitherto you have been in the power of enemies! Oh! we have much to say to each other!"

"Yes—much, much!" murmured the charming girl: and Christian felt that she shuddered with a strong spasmodic quivering of the form as she clung to his arm! "Oh! I have suffered deeply, deeply, since we parted—not only here"—and she glanced around the secret chamber (which, we should observe, was most comfortably furnished, though a horrible prison all the same)—"but likewise in London!"

"My poor Isabella!" said Christian, the tears trickling down his cheeks—and he once more strained her to his breast, both the while totally oblivious, in the rapture of their feelings, that the horrible black woman was present in that chamber. "You stand in need of rest—you will sleep sweetly, my beloved," continued our hero, "now that you are conscious of safety. To-morrow we will tell each other all that we may mutually have to impart. Come, dearest Isabella—tarry not another instant in this place which you must loathe and abhor. Ah, you are here!" ejaculated Christian, as his eyes now suddenly settled upon the negress while she was about to conduct Miss Vincent from the room.

"The young lady will tell you, sir," said the black woman, "that I have not been unkind to her."

"The wretch!" murmured Isabella, shuddering: and then she hastily added, "But we can now afford to forgive her, dear Christian—and I willingly admit that apart from being my gaoler, I have no cause of complaint against her. She promised me my liberty—but I dared not believe her: I dreaded some new treachery—some fresh snare——indeed, I was so wretched—half wild, half mad—that I knew not what to think when she told me of her infamous master's death, and of strange things that had taken place within the walls of this house."

"Think not of the past, my beloved," said Christian, pressing her fair hand in his own: "no one can molest you now—no one will even think of attempting it. As for you," he continued, addressing himself to the negress, "I promised you impunity under certain circumstances—and nothing has transpired to induce me to fly from my word. Remain you in the house for the rest of the night: but perhaps you will do as well to take your departure at an early hour in the morning. I do not ask if you are possessed of funds: for one who has served Sir John Steward as *you* have served him, cannot possibly fail to have a well-filled purse."

The black woman's look showed that our hero was by no means wrong in his surmise; and muttering some words of thanks for the impunity which was guaranteed her, she turned to descend the stairs.

"Stop!" exclaimed Christian, darting forward and holding her back: "*we*, if you please, will lead the way:"—for the thought had flashed to his mind that there was a strong bolt to the exterior side of the outer door.

"I have no interest in playing a treacherous part," said the negress.

Our hero took no notice of the observation—but, carrying the lamp in his hand, he conducted Isabella down the staircase—the negress following with the light which she had taken from the table in the chamber. Christian unlocked the door of the bedroom with which the moveable panel in the wall communicated: he conducted Isabella forth; and indicating an unoccupied chamber, gave her the lamp at the door, pressed her hand, and instantaneously withdrew. The negress disappeared to some other part of the building: our hero entered the room where he had established his own temporary quarters; and in the midst of the most delicious thoughts—thoughts of purest, holiest love—a sweet sleep stole upon his eyes.

He awoke at a very early hour in the morning; and for some minutes could scarcely persuade himself that the incidents of the preceding night were not all a dream. The panel-door, however, still stood open; and this was a confirmation of the reality of all those occurrences. Curiosity prompted him to examine the door: he discovered where the secret spring was situated—how it worked—and where it had to be touched, on either the inner or outer side, so as to make the door open for egress or ingress. Then, on its being shut he could not help admiring with what exquisite nicety it was made to fit into its setting; so that no eye, however scrutinising, could possibly detect any indication of the existence of such a door. This survey being finished, and some of his apparel being huddled on, he repaired to his own chamber for the sake of the conveniences of the toilet. Mrs. Oxenden was not there—but he perceived a billet upon the toilet-table: it was addressed to himself—and the handwriting was the beautiful fluid one of a lady. For an instant he hesitated to open it: but this indecision was quickly overruled by the thought that as he had made up his mind to communicate to his friend the Baronet everything that had occurred, he would show Sir Edgar this letter likewise, whatsoever its contents might be, and no matter how earnest should be its pleadings for his forbearance, his silence, and his secrecy.

He accordingly opened it. We need not transcribe its contents: suffice it to say that they were of the nature which our young hero had anticipated. In this billet Mrs. Oxenden pleaded the strength of an irresistible passion as an excuse for the conduct of the preceding evening: she appealed to Christian whether he did not consider her sufficiently humiliated and mortified by the rejection of her advances, to abstain from inflicting upon her the additional punishment of exposure: she proclaimed herself a wretched woman—and finished by soliciting his mercy.

Christian's toilet was speedily completed; and he repaired at once to Sir Edgar Beverley's chamber. The young Baronet was close upon the termination of his own toilet: and he immediately saw that our hero had something important to communicate. In the fewest possible words Christian related to the wondering Sir Edgar all the incidents of the past night,—how Mrs. Oxenden had sought him in his own chamber—how he had fled to another—how he had there encountered the negress—how she had revealed to him the mysteries of the secret chamber—how he had proceeded thither—and how in the captive he had recognised one as dear to him as Laura was to Sir Edgar Beverley himself.

"And here," added Christian, "is a billet which I found in my own room just now. I think you will admit, my dear Sir Edgar, that no lenient terms are to be kept with a woman of this character—and that there is nothing unmanly on my part in disregarding her appeal for secrecy—nothing dishonourable in showing the letter to you."

"On the contrary, my dear Ashton," answered the Baronet: "it was your duty to show me this letter—and for more reasons than one. An assemblage of the most marvellous circumstances has rendered a being who is so dear to you an inmate of Verner House; and she shall be welcomed as a guest with all the warmth of that friendship which is experienced for you. In her Laura will find a companion and a friend: and the necessity for her infamous sister's presence here, at once ceases. Moreover, it would be an insult to yourself—and an insult to Miss Vincent, to bring her into contact with a being so degraded, so polluted, as this Mrs. Oxenden. Yes—she shall depart—and within the hour that is passing! Come, my friend—we will go and give all suitable directions for the ensurance of the comfort of Miss Vincent."

Sir Edgar's toilet was speedily finished: he and our hero descended to the breakfast-parlour; and almost immediately afterwards Laura made her appearance. When the usual greetings were exchanged, Sir Edgar addressed his beloved in the following manner:—

"My dear Laura, it is with deep regret I have to inform you that fresh circumstances have transpired to prove the impropriety of your sister remaining any longer beneath this roof. For your own reputation's sake there must be an immediate and complete severance between you both. You know me too well to suspect for an instant that I should act unjustly or tyrannically; and you will be satisfied, dear Laura, with my simple assurance of the necessity of this step—you will not ask me for those details which would only shock the purity of your own feelings——"

"Alas, my unhappy sister!" murmured the weeping Laura: "but I know, Edgar, that whatever you do is for the best!"

"Thank you, my beloved, for this assurance!" exclaimed the Baronet. "And now wipe away those tears: it is not for you to be saddened by the iniquity of others! No, no—happiness awaits you, Laura——"

"I enjoy it now," she murmuringly added, "in all respects save on my sister's account."

"And fear not," Beverley hastened to observe, "that you will be without a suitable companion. There is one beneath this roof who is worthy to be your friend—whom you will regard as such, and whom you can love. She herself will explain what circumstances brought her hither; and when I add that she is as dear to Mr. Ashton, as you, my Laura, are to me, I know that it is sufficient to induce you to display every attention. Go, therefore, to Miss Vincent, dearest Laura—and in the meanwhile your sister will take her departure."

The young lady quitted the room; and in about five minutes the Baronet rang the bell to inquire, through the medium of one of the female domestics, whether Mrs. Oxenden had yet left her chamber?—for we should observe that Laura now no longer occupied the sleeping apartment which was next to the one tenanted by her sister. Christian temporarily withdrew from the breakfast-parlour, while Sir Edgar Beverley had a last interview with Mrs. Oxenden. We need not enter into minute details of what passed between them on the occasion. Suffice it to say that the lady's eyes flashed malignant fires when she learnt that Christian had communicated everything to the Baronet: but she was somewhat relieved from the bitterness of her vexation when he assured her that, for the sake of her innocent sister, all further exposure would be avoided, on condition that Mrs. Oxenden would at once withdraw from Verner House. To this she was compelled to assent: she saw that her game had been more than played out—that she was irretrievably ruined in the estimation of Sir Edgar Beverley—and that it was likewise useless to make any further attempt to regain a footing in the household. She did not ask for a parting interview with her sister: she knew that it would be interdicted if she proffered the request. The travelling-carriage was ordered to be gotten in readiness with all possible dispatch; and Mrs. Oxenden took her departure, well nigh spirit-broken, and completely dejected and desponding.

Soon after this evil-minded woman's peremptory and ignominious dismissal from Verner House, Sir Edgar Beverley and all his guests were assembled in the breakfast-parlour. Laura and Isabella had already become excellent friends: the Baronet and Christian were both delighted with the spectacle of the sisterly intimacy which circumstances had caused to spring up all in a moment, as it were, between two such amiable and beautiful beings;—while Mr. Andrews, the solicitor, evidently enjoyed the society with which he now mingled, and which seemed so much more worthy to occupy the splendid apartments of Verner House than the deceased Baronet and his infamous accomplice Mrs. Oxenden. No secret had been made of the discovery of the mysterious chamber on the highest storey of the mansion: every one within those walls was now acquainted with the circumstance: for it was necessary to account for the sudden appearance of Miss Vincent at the house—and it was likewise Sir Edgar Beverley's intention, immediately after his marriage, to set masons and bricklayers to work in order to destroy that chamber and renovate that part of the house in a becoming manner.

Edgar comprehended full well that Christian and Isabella must have much to say to each other. Accordingly, after breakfast, he invited Laura to walk with him in the garden—Mr. Andrews withdrew to the library to write some letters on business—our hero and Miss Vincent now found themselves alone together.

"With you, my dear Christian," said the young maiden, "I can have no secrets—and yet I am about to speak to you of something which *you* must keep secret from all the rest of the world ——unless, indeed," she added mournfully, "you shall be of opinion that another course ought to be adopted: in which case I shall be influenced entirely by you. Oh! it is a dreadful subject!—and I hope, dear Christian—I hope that you will decide in favour of keeping the secret!"

"Good heavens, my dearest Isabella!" exclaimed our hero, astonished and even frightened—for he saw how very pale his beloved became: "what terrible topic is this to which you allude—which you approach with so much diffidence—and over which you are so anxious that the veil of secrecy shall be thrown?"

"Alas, dear Christian! it is indeed a very painful topic," rejoined Isabella: "but I will not keep you any longer in suspense. You know how my poor uncle died——"

"Good God!" ejaculated our hero: "does it allude to his most shocking, horrible murder?"

"It does—alas, it does indeed!" replied Miss Vincent. "And you will be astonished—you will be startled—aye, and horrified too—when I speak of the hideous, frightful mystery—which does not appear to be altogether a mystery—for they accuse each other——"

"They! Who, dearest Isabella?" asked Christian, in the consternation of suspense.

"Who?" echoed the young maiden. "Oh, that I should have to tell you that the Countess and Adolphus—my aunt and my cousin——"

"Impossible, Isabella!" exclaimed Christian. "What? the beautiful Ethel, so amiable and so kind—and the generous-hearted Adolphus, who conducted himself so handsomely in favouring our own interviews——"

"Alas! it is as I tell you, my dear Christian," responded Isabella, in a tone of the deepest dejection, and with a visible shudder passing through her entire form. "Accident one day rendered me a listener to a few words which passed between them. I was entering the Red Drawing-room ——you remember, it has a large screen drawn before the door——and I suppose that though altogether unintentional on my part, I must have opened that door so noiselessly that they did not hear me. I was advancing into the room, but had not at the instant let the door escape from my hand, when I was suddenly transfixed——Oh, Christian! I was petrified with horror—on catching the words that were uttered in low hoarse tones from the lips of each——"

"The Countess and the young Earl?" said Christian, astounded and horror-stricken by what he thus heard: and then, as a thousand little reminiscences swept like a whirlwind in upon his brain, he for the first time comprehended the illicit connexion which had existed between the Countess of Lascelles and Adolphus.

"Yes—I mean that they were talking within the room, hidden from me by the screen, as I also was hidden from them," continued Isabella; "and though their voices were so altered as they spoke—Oh, so altered! yet did I recognise them. And if any further proof were wanting of who the speakers were, I heard them address one another by their Christian names——"

"Good heavens!—this is dreadful," said our young hero. "But what were the words which they spoke on the occasion?"

"Oh! I can too faithfully repeat them," answered the shuddering Isabella: "for at the very instant they were uttered, they seemed to impress themselves with a poignant and acute agony upon my brain, as if seared there with a red hot iron!"

"This is indeed dreadful!" said Christian, whose countenance was now as pale as that of Isabella herself. "And those words which they spoke——"

"I will tell you," rejoined the young damsel. "Lord Osmond—I mean the new Earl of Lascelles, said to the Countess, 'Ethel, it is useless for you to persist in this shocking falsehood. As I told you on a former occasion when we spoke on the subject—the first occasion when we met after the dreadful deed—it was *your* hand that did it!'—'No, Adolphus,' replied the Countess, in a voice as low, deep, and hoarse as his own, 'you know that you are giving utterance to an untruth as base as it is cowardly: it was *your* hand that took the old man's life, murderer that you are!'—'No,' rejoined Adolphus, 'I repeat, Ethel, it is *you* who are the murderess!'"

"Dreadful! horrible!" exclaimed Christian. "My poor Isabella, your blood must have curdled in your veins?"

"No language, dear Christian, can describe what I felt," answered the young lady: "it was indeed dreadful and shocking! I dared not penetrate into the room and face those two. Heaven alone can tell how I regained my own chamber, or whether my presence in that drawing-room had passed undiscovered and unsuspected. But when alone, I reflected on the course I should adopt. To remain any longer beneath that roof was impossible: and to betray to the knowledge of justice what I had heard, appeared to me equally out of the question. I could not give up my own relatives to the scaffold! Oh, how strenuously did I endeavour to persuade myself that it was all a delusion—and that my brain, fevered by recent illness and horrors, had led me to misinterpret some words that had caught my ears. But no—it was impossible! As I have already told you, Christian, those dreadful words were seared upon my brain as if with a red hot iron. But what was I to do? I did not want to let the guilty ones know that I had overheard them; and yet I was resolved to remain no longer in that house of horror and of crime. I so far conquered my feelings as to appear before them once again. It was at luncheon-time. I had previously been ill: they noticed that I was looking paler than ever—and no wonder! I said something about the influence which recent horrors had exercised on my mind—I spoke of the want of change of scene as well as change of air; and the Countess herself suggested that I should go into the country for a few weeks, under the care of Mrs. Gardiner the housekeeper. I eagerly caught at the proposition, and said that I would leave that very day. I could not look in the face of either of that wretched pair: I know not therefore whether my words produced any peculiar effect upon them——in fact I remembered but little more, until I found myself seated by the side of Mrs. Gardiner in the travelling-carriage."

"And whither did you go?" inquired Christian.

"Mrs. Gardiner's son has a small farm near Tunbridge in Kent: she herself was anxious to see him and her daughter-in-law; and it had therefore been arranged that we should proceed thither to pass as long a time as I might think fit. My own maid was likewise in attendance upon me. We reached our destination in the evening; and I found that my new quarters were established in a comfortable little homestead where every attention was shown me. This was about ten days back; and therefore, you see, I had not been there many days before I was seized upon and carried off by the wretches who brought me hither. I must tell you that an ill-looking elderly woman had accosted me in the morning while I was rambling by myself in the fields; and she addressed me in a familiar style which I did not like. I turned indignantly away; and though annoyed for the time, soon ceased to think of the incident—for, alas! dear Christian, I had other and weightier subjects to occupy my thoughts. In the evening I again walked out: I did not ramble very far—but it was in a secluded lane that I was proceeding, when I was pounced upon by a man and a couple of women—one of the latter being she who had addressed me with such familiar impertinence in the forenoon. To be brief, I was thrust into a post-chaise which was waiting at a little distance: I fell into a deep swoon—and when I came back to consciousness, was being borne along at a rapid rate inside that vehicle, and in the horrible companionship which I have mentioned."

"The wretches!" ejaculated Christian, his cheeks flushing with indignation: and then he strained Isabella in his arms.

"They used the most horrible menaces," continued the young damsel, "to compel me to remain quiet as we passed through villages or towns, or stopped to change horses. I dared not cry out: I feared for my life, helpless as I was in the power of those people. I have a recollection of the man once alighting at some place where we stopped; and I caught the words that he whispered to an inquiring landlord—'Poor creature, she is mad: we are taking her to an asylum!' Then I swooned again, and recovered not my senses till I found myself in the chamber whence you delivered me last night. Oh, the distraction of my thoughts—the frenzy of my feelings, as I really fancied at first that I was in a mad-house! But the negress was there: she told me where I was—and assured me that if I would only remain quiet for a day or two, I should be set at freedom. And now, dear Christian, I have nothing more to tell you. But I have something to ask——"

"I understand what it is, dearest Isabella," exclaimed our hero; "you are anxious on account of the people at the farm, and what they must think of your sudden disappearance, so incomprehensible to them! You shall write a letter at once to Mrs. Gardiner——And will you not tell her, dear Isabel, that you intend to remain here for two or three weeks until your friend Laura is married?—for you cannot possibly leave her, you know, until that event takes place."

And Christian's eyes eloquently added that which his lips left unspoken, and which might have been interpreted thus:—"And you will not deprive us of the happiness of being together?"

"Laura has besought me to remain with her," murmured the bashfully blushing Isabella: "and I have promised that I would. But would it be too much—would it be too far imposing upon Sir Edgar Beverley's hospitality, if I were to order the housekeeper and my maid to join me here?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Christian: "it will not offend Sir Edgar—on the contrary, it will give him pleasure to render your visit here as agreeable as possible. Write your letter, dear Isabel—I will go and speak to Sir Edgar at once—and one of his footmen shall take the very next train for Tunbridge; so that within a few hours Mrs. Gardiner and the others at the farm will be relieved of all anxiety concerning you. Yes—for the sake of appearances—for many, many reasons, your servants must be where you yourself are!"

"But you have not told me, Christian," said Isabella, with a look of timid apprehension, as he was about to leave the room, "what your opinion is——"

"Relative to that guilty couple?" added our hero: then, after a few moments' pause, he said, "I fear that the secret must be kept, and they must be left to the punishment of their torturing consciences. Besides, there is evidently some dreadful mystery enveloping the affair—or else why those mutual accusations, those denials, and those recriminations? But pen your note, dear Isabel —— I now go straight to Sir Edgar Beverley."

All was done as Christian had suggested. The Baronet was only too happy to comply with any request that was made to him by his young friend Christian, or on behalf of Laura's new friend Isabella. A domestic was despatched to Tunbridge; and in the evening he returned, accompanied by Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Vincent's maid.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

MAKEPEACE.

The scene now changes to the mansion of the late Earl of Lascelles—that mansion where a horrible murder had been committed a short time back, and whence Isabella Vincent had fled in consternation and horror, as we have just heard her describing the circumstance to Christian Ashton.

It was evening—and the Countess of Lascelles, dressed in deep mourning, was seated on a sofa in the Red Drawing-room—that very apartment of which Isabella had spoken. She was pale even to deadly whiteness—haggard and careworn: her sable garments and her snowy white cap of widowhood threw out her pallor into all the ghastlier relief. There was the glitter of a wild and almost frenzied uneasiness in her eyes, as if she felt her's to be a position which was no longer tolerable, but yet as if she were utterly bewildered when endeavouring to make up her mind to any particular course of action. Oh, how different did she seem from that gay, beautiful, glittering Countess who but a short time back was revelling in all the delights of illicit love with her paramour Adolphus!

Presently the door opened: but so noiselessly did it swing upon its hinges, that it was no wonder if Ethel and Osmond had heard it not, when a few days previously Isabella entered and stood transfixed on catching the dreadful words that were then exchanged between them. Who was it that entered now? Adolphus himself—the Earl of Lascelles, as he had been called since the late nobleman's murder. And he too was fearfully altered: he looked a dozen years older than he really was—his cheeks were even more sunken and haggard than those of Ethel herself: he walked with a slow and languid step, as if he were enfeebled and borne down by a tremendous weight of care. As he appeared from behind the screen, Ethel gave a slight start: but far stronger was that spasmodic shock as it was experienced inwardly. The young Earl of Lascelles took a chair opposite to her: their looks had only met for an instant, and were then averted with a mutual and simultaneous feeling of immense and indescribable horror.

"How long is this state of things to continue?" asked Adolphus, at the expiration of more than a minute's continued silence, and speaking in a voice that sounded hollow and sepulchral.

"What mean you?" inquired Ethel: and for an instant her eyes flashed loathingly and abhorrently upon him whom she had once adored with so strong and devouring a passion.

"I mean, Ethel," answered the young Earl, "that we are leading a life which is breaking our hearts and hurrying us to the grave—that the domestics of the household will not much longer entertain the belief that it is affliction for the lost one that is devouring us—and that all this is produced by your obstinacy! For if you would but confess, I would pardon you——yes, by heaven I would pardon you, although we should separate the next moment!"

"Coward, thus to persecute a helpless woman!" exclaimed Ethel. "It is for you to confess—then I will pardon you—and as you have said, we will separate on the instant. Do you imagine that even if by thus haunting me like a ghost, you drive me mad, and elicit from me in my frenzy the avowal of a crime which I did *not* commit,—do you imagine, I ask, that if you were thus to succeed in your diabolic purpose, you will deceive that heaven whose eye penetrates into the secret recesses of your heart? Are you so insensate as to suppose that you can virtually and actually shift the burthen of the crime from your own conscience and hurl it upon mine?"

"Enough, Ethel!" exclaimed Adolphus fiercely: "it is I who ought to put all these questions to you. Why do you remain here to haunt me?"

"I will remain here," answered the Countess, "until I shall have compelled you to admit your horrible guilt to me!"

"And I will remain here," rejoined the young Earl, "until I have brought a vile woman to reason!"

"This is abominable!" cried the Countess, her ashy lips quivering with rage. "The world never saw such dastard conduct—such a cruel, bitter persecution!"

"Ah, I may retort the same!" said Adolphus bitterly. "But listen, Ethel! Your conduct is most insensate—it will inevitably lead to suspicion—circumstances will enmesh you—you will be proved the murderess——"

"No—it is you," she ejaculated, "who will be proved the murderer—and you who will suffer accordingly! Think you not that Isabella suspected something when she insisted on leaving the house so suddenly——"

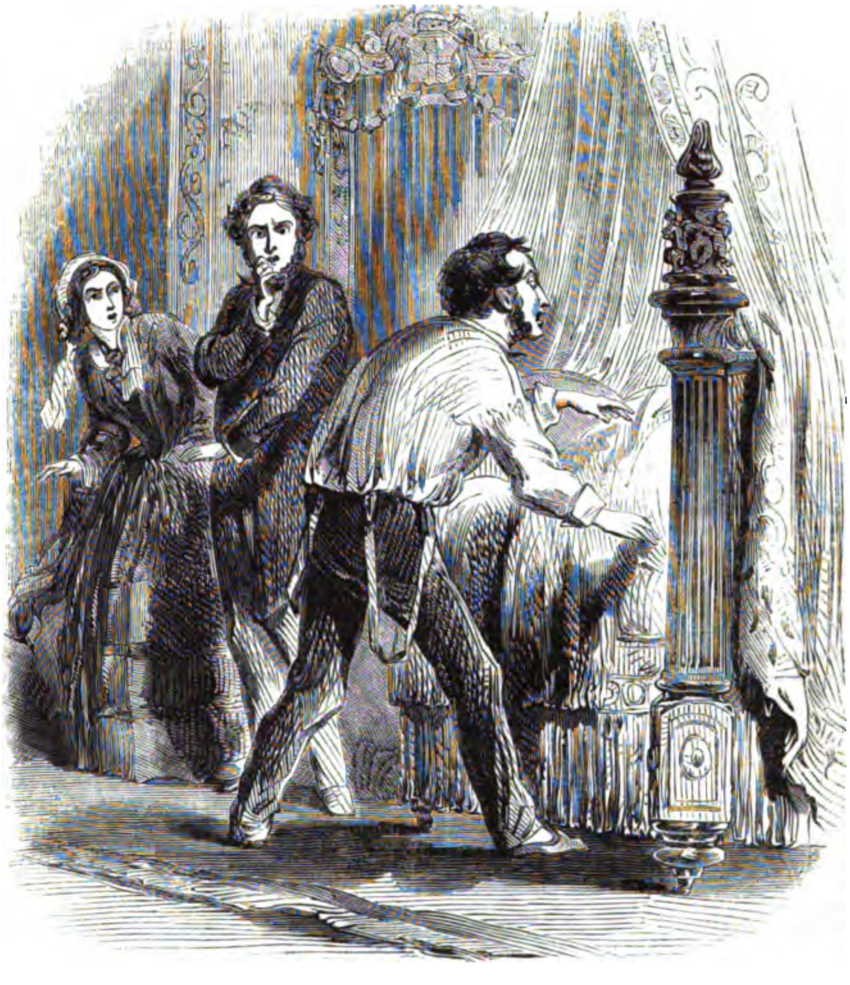
"Yes—she suspected something," interrupted Adolphus; "but it was against yourself that her misgivings rested. The result of your obstinacy, you perceive, has already developed itself: that poor girl has gone mad—there can be no doubt of it—and she has fled from the farm in Kent——"

"Yes: but whatever may happen to her," interjected Ethel, "must be charged at your door. Once—once for all, confess! It is only to me that the confession has to be made—it will never pass my lips: but how different will be the terms on which we shall thereafter stand! You will receive my forgiveness, though everything else will be at an end between us—our minds will recover a certain calm—as much calmness as they can ever hope to experience in this world—we shall separate—and those circumstances which are now calculated to excite suspicion and eventually to fix the crime upon you, will cease and have an end."

"No—they are tending to fix the crime upon you!" retorted the Earl of Lascelles with a savage ferocity. "Those are most cunning and most admirable arguments which you have used; and the use thereof proves how well you can anticipate what was about to be uttered from my lips. Come, Ethel, confess—for heaven's sake confess!"

The Countess made a gesture of scorn and contempt, blended likewise with abhorrence—but said nothing.

"You do not probably know," resumed the young Earl of Lascelles, "how serious matters are growing. There is Makepeace—too well acquainted with all that weakness into which love betrayed you and me,—Makepeace who succoured and who



screened us,—there is this man, I repeat, Ethel, flinging his furtive looks of suspicion upon you——"

"Indeed, Adolphus!" interrupted the Countess, "I was thinking of giving you the same warning, in the hope that it would lead you to put an end at once to this frightful state of existence for us both; for I can assure you that it is upon *you* the suspicious looks of Makepeace are furtively thrown."

"Ethel, you will drive me mad!" exclaimed Adolphus, starting up from his seat. "One word, Ethel——"

"One word, Adolphus!" and the Countess, starting up at the same time, confronted the young nobleman—lately her paramour—now the object of her bitterest aversion.

They gazed upon each other with a strange fixity of look—as if each momentarily expected the eyes of the other to quail and be downcast—as if each wondered that it was not so; and then each withdrawing those regards as if by simultaneous and tacit consent,—Ethel resumed her seat upon the sofa. Adolphus turned upon his heel, and quitted the room with a quicker step than when he had entered it.

He opened the door somewhat abruptly; and he beheld a person gliding away across the landing, as if from the vicinage of that door where he might have been listening. This individual was Makepeace. Adolphus was instantaneously by his side; and clutching him forcibly by the arm, he said in a low hoarse voice, "What were you doing there?"

"I, my lord?" said Makepeace, for an instant assuming a look of most candid innocence: but suddenly changing, with the air of one who did not think it worth while to dissemble, he added in a sort of independent manner, "If your lordship will give me five or ten minutes, I will explain myself."

The Earl of Lascelles was about to fling the fellow away from him as a chastisement for his insolence: but with a strong effort he subdued his boiling passion, and said, "Follow me."

He led the way towards his own chamber—to reach which an ante-room had to be traversed; and locking the door of that ante-room, the young Earl of Lascelles was tolerably well assured there could be no listeners to whatsoever was about to take place. To convince himself, however, completely upon the point, he looked behind all the draperies in his bedroom; and having done this, he turned towards Makepeace, saying, "And now what is it?"

"Why does your lordship take all these precautions," asked the valet—"locking doors, looking behind curtains——"

"Because," interrupted the Earl of Lascelles—and he spoke with a kind of haughty composure—"something tells me that you are about to address me on a delicate topic."

"What topic, my lord?" asked Makepeace, gazing fixedly upon his master's countenance.

"When I was insensate enough," rejoined the Earl, speaking as it were between his teeth which were nearly close set, "to suffer you to become acquainted with that love which subsisted between myself and the Countess, I little suspected that you would ever think of taking an unworthy advantage of the confidence thus reposed in you."

"And when, my lord, have I done so?" asked Makepeace, who seemed for an instant staggered by the manner in which he was thus addressed.

"You have not done it yet," responded the Earl: "but I am much mistaken if you are not about to do so now. I should like to be so mistaken! But there was something in your manner a few minutes back upon the landing—there is something even in your look at this very moment——"

"Well, my lord," interrupted Makepeace, not merely recovering his effrontery, but evidently becoming more and more inclined to throw off the mask completely—"and what if I think it high time your lordship should do something for me? what if I mean to demand that which you had not the generosity to offer me?"

"Speak your wishes," said the Earl of Lascelles, still with an outward appearance of cold and haughty dignity, whatever he might have inwardly felt.

"Look you, my lord," said Makepeace—and the usually servile, grovelling, bowing menial, who had never before looked as if he had dared say his soul was his own, drew his person upright, thrust his hands into his breeches pockets, and planted himself close in front of the Earl with an air of defiance. "Considering all I have done to serve you when you were Lord Osmond—how I winked at your pranks with the old Earl's wife—how I told lies to screen you—and considering also what I could tell if I chose, about the very circumstances that changed your title from simple Lord Osmond to the grand one of Earl of Lascelles—I think that if your lordship was to write me a cheque for ten thousand pounds, you would only be doing what was fair and proper under the circumstances."

At the commencement of this speech on the part of the insolent valet, the young nobleman experienced the utmost difficulty in preventing himself from striking Makepeace down upon the floor. At the allusion to the circumstances of his amour with the Countess, the blood of Adolphus tingled in every vein, and a crimson flush mantled on his previously pale cheeks. But when Makepeace so darkly and unmistakably hinted at the murder of the old Earl, Adolphus suddenly became pale as death—the blood appeared to stagnate into ice in his veins—and he quivered visibly.

"Ah." he muttered, "it is as I feared—but I was resolved to ascertain! You have been playing the eavesdropper—you have been listening to-night at the door of the Red Drawing-room?"

"And what if I have?" demanded Makepeace, with dogged brutality of tone and look. "What I heard there, only confirmed my previous suspicions. Yes, my lord—I mean what I say! You had better purchase my secresy: give me ten thousand pounds—and I take myself off, never to trouble you any more."

"Makepeace, hear me!" said the Earl of Lascelles, fearfully excited. "It was not because my love betrayed me into such weakness, that I could have been guilty of so horrible a crime——"

"He who would seduce his father's wife," interrupted Makepeace, "would scarcely hesitate to take that father's life!"

"Ah!" thought Adolphus to himself, "he does not, then, know the terrific secret of my birth!—he does not suspect that Ethel is not my mother-in-law, and that the old Earl was not my father!"

"Come, my lord, what are you thinking of?" demanded the valet: "your lips move but say nothing. Let us cut all this short. You see that I know everything. Who had better reasons than you to make away with the poor old man just as he was on the very point of sending you abroad?"

"Makepeace, I swear that I am innocent!" exclaimed Adolphus vehemently.

"Your lordship would have some difficulty," returned the valet, with a sneer, "in persuading a jury or in making the House of Lords believe your innocence."

"But you have not overheard me confess guilt!" cried Adolphus. "No!—in all your listenings, you can have heard nothing but denial on my part!"

"But I have heard the Countess accuse your lordship of it a dozen times within the last hour," rejoined Makepeace. "In short, you accused each other; and therefore if I said the word, you would both have to go and pit your averments against one another elsewhere."

The Earl of Lascelles was frightfully convinced of the truth of all this: his pale countenance again became ghastlier still—again too did he tremble visibly, as he thought within himself, "The exposure would be hideous—horrible! and *one* at least would be sure to go to the scaffold!"

"Now, my lord, what is your decision?" asked Makepeace, who saw that the victory was his own.

"If I give you this money," was the Earl of Lascelles' answer, "you must not for a moment think it is a bribe for your silence with respect to a terrible crime of which I am incapable: but it shall be given to you to save the honour of a lady from exposure. You shall have the amount—but on condition that you henceforth and for ever leave me unmolested!"

"That is a bargain, my lord," replied Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that it rested with his own goodwill and pleasure whether he should adhere to it in future years.

"But," continued the Earl of Lascelles, "two or three days may elapse before I shall be enabled to place the amount in your hands: for as yet, as you may have seen, I have had neither heart nor spirit to take any steps to put myself in possession of my late father's property; and though his undisputed heir,"—and the young nobleman looked hard in the valet's face, as he thus spoke, to assure himself that the terrific secret of his birth was indeed unsuspected—and the result of the survey was at least on this point altogether satisfactory,—"and though my late father's undisputed heir," he continued, "yet still there are certain little legal formalities to be fulfilled. But I will set about them to-morrow; and I repeat in two or three days——"

"There is no hurry for a day or two, my lord," answered Makepeace, "provided the bargain is to be considered as good as settled, and you will not fly off from it."

"I will not," returned Adolphus. "And now leave me. I shall remain here in my own chamber for the rest of the evening. You may tell Walter"—thus alluding to his principal body-servant—"that I shall not require his services to-night."

"Very good, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, now that his object was gained, at once relapsed into that servile civility of tone, look, and manner, which was habitual with him: and bowing low, he issued from the nobleman's presence,—doubtless chuckling inwardly at the apparent success of his scheme of extortion.

As for the Earl of Lascelles himself, it may easily be conceived that he was left in a state of mind scarcely to be envied by even a felon lying under sentence of death in a condemned cell.

Makepeace, on closing the door of the ante-chamber behind him, heard the key turn again violently in the lock; and he knew therefore that the young nobleman was in a condition of fearful excitement.

"Ah! he will remain there for all the rest of the evening," thought Makepeace to himself: "he will not issue thence till the morning. Well, then, so much the better! It affords me the opportunity to carry out that other project which I had in view."

With these words musingly spoken to himself, Makepeace entered the Red Drawing-room, where the Countess of Lascelles was seated. She did not immediately hear him; and when he passed round the end of the screen into her presence, she thought for a moment that it was Adolphus returning to speak to her. But upon perceiving that it was her late husband's confidential valet, and that he advanced into the room with an air somewhat different from that which he habitually wore—an air that was in a certain respect strange, though she could not exactly define to herself how it was thus singular,—Ethel started, and a feeling seized upon her sending a chill to her heart like a presentiment of evil. He approached nearer to the sofa on which she was half-reclining at the instant he entered—but where, upon perceiving who the individual was, she at once raised herself up to a sitting posture.

"Pardon me, my lady," said Makepeace, "but I wish to have a few words' conversation with you:"—and neither the tone of his voice nor the expression of his countenance was so completely respectful as it was wont to be, though it could not be pronounced downright uncivil.

"A few words' conversation with me?" said the Countess of Lascelles: and though the worst misgiving relative to something wrong smote her heart at the time, she nevertheless asserted by her tone and manner the dignity of her sex and rank, and drew herself up with the air of a well-bred and high-born lady who is offended.

"Yes—I said what I mean," replied Makepeace, who was inspired by his success with the young Earl to be more or less prepared to carry matters with a tolerable high hand towards the Countess. "Your ladyship and I must have a little discourse together——"

"If it be relative to the affairs of the household," interrupted Ethel, now choosing to play the part of not seeming to understand what was addressed to her, "you must speak to his lordship: for as you are aware, I am no longer the mistress here, unless it be upon sufferance."

"What I have to say to your ladyship," exclaimed Makepeace, growing bolder and bolder, or rather displaying more and more hardihood and effrontery, "has nothing to do with household matters, nor his lordship, nor anybody else except your ladyship and me."

Ethel's eyes flashed fire, and the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her countenance. For an instant, however, the thought struck her that Makepeace might be tipsy; and she gazed upon him searchingly and scrutinizingly for a few moments: but though a sinister light did indeed shine in his eyes, it was not that of intoxication—it was the devouring glow of passion and desire. Ethel could not possibly fail to comprehend it: a burning blush suffused her countenance—she quivered with rage, and with a sense of indignity, of outrage, and of insult—to which feelings she however dared not give as full and complete an expression as her tortured feelings prompted. At the same time she could not altogether subdue the violence of her emotions; and she said half angrily and half in remonstrance, "Makepeace, something strange has come over you—you are forgetting yourself—I do not understand this conduct on your part!"

"The explanation will be soon given, my lady," he rejoined; "and I already see by your looks that you are not very far off from understanding it. You need not glance uneasily around—no one will come in—his lordship has just retired for the night—he told me that he had. You and I have got all the discourse to ourselves; and when I tell your ladyship that with a single word I can blow your honour, fame, name, position, safety, and everything else to atoms——"

"Makepeace, what mean you?" ejaculated Ethel, with a strong spasmodic start: and then she nearly sank back, overcome by the weight of those frightful apprehensions which seized upon her.

"I mean this, my lady," responded the valet, whose hardihood grew greater as he perceived that his intended victim's misgivings increased: "I know of your amour with the young Earl—I mean when he was Lord Osmond——"

The wretched Countess moaned deeply and covered her face with her hands: for she was only too well aware of the fatal truth of the valet's words;—and never did woman experience a more bitter chastisement for a frailty of which she had been guilty, nor more profoundly regret the comparative levity with which at the time she had treated the fact that circumstances had compelled her paramour Adolphus to make a confidant of this man and to invoke his succour in throwing the old Earl off the scent.

"Yes, my lady," continued Makepeace, "I know of your amour with the young nobleman: but *that* is almost nothing in comparison with something else that I also know! There is however no necessity to make fifty words of what may be told in five; and therefore I may as well at once explain to your ladyship that all the time you were speaking with his lordship just now, my ear was fast fixed against the key-hole, and so I lost not a single word."

Again did the Countess moan; for all in an instant did whatsoever had taken place between Adolphus and herself flash back to her memory. But suddenly raising her eyes, she appeared to regain a certain degree of composure—or at least of mental fortitude—as she said, "You heard me say nothing, Makepeace, which justifies you in treating me in a manner so outrageously disrespectful."

"On the contrary," retorted the valet, "I heard his lordship accuse you of a crime——"

"Silence!—enough, enough!" ejaculated Ethel. "What is it that you require? Gold? If so, name the sum——But, Ah! think not for a minute that it is because I am really guilty——No! criminal though I have been in other respects——But, my God! to have thus to speak in the presence of a menial!" said the Countess, suddenly turning aside and murmuring these few last words to herself: "it is dreadful—dreadful!"

"Gold? No—I need not gold—at least not yet from *you*:"—and here Makepeace suddenly lowered his own voice to an under tone: then again speaking aloud, he added, "No, my lady—it is not gold that I want from your hands. Look you! we are here alone together—no one overhears us—and therefore I may as well tell you——"

"What?" ejaculated Ethel, with a half-shriek as she sank back in affright from the bold insolent looks which the valet bent upon her as he leaned partially towards her. "For heaven's sake be quick, and let this scene end!"

"Is is nearly finished," rejoined Makepeace, "so far as I am concerned: it will be your fault if it is prolonged. In one word, then, you are the handsomest of women—and if to-night, when all the house is quiet, you hear a gentle tap at your chamber-door——"

The word "Monster!" came up to the very tip of the Countess of Lascelles' tongue—but she could not give utterance to it: for though she had expected some insolent avowal or overture of this sort, yet nevertheless now when it was made, it struck her as heavy a blow as if it were perfectly unanticipated. She was seized with consternation and dismay; and she sate gazing with wild staring eyes upon the valet.

"Yes—now your ladyship understands my meaning," he went on to say, with the air of one who felt he had only to dictate his own terms in order to obtain them; "and I need not tell your ladyship that everything must be kept secret between you and me. Of course *you* will be silent for your own sake; and your ladyship need not be afraid that before my lord or any of the servants I shall betray what takes place, by any familiarity on my part."

Ethel groaned inwardly: she saw how completely she was in the villain's power: for she thought to herself, "If by opposition or resistance on my part he is driven to a vindictive course, there is at least *one* who will go to the scaffold!"—and this was in the same sense as what the young Earl of Lascelles had himself thought half-an-hour previously.

But all in an instant it flashed to Ethel's mind that if she could only gain a reprieve—if in the desperation of her circumstances she could only secure twenty-four hours' delay—something might turn up—some plan might be hit upon to release herself from the terrible persecutions of this wretch: or at all events she should have time to flee away for ever from the metropolis, or even from England itself.

"I understand you, Makepeace," she said, in a low deep voice: "but all this has come so suddenly upon me—I am so ill—so very ill—that if you would have mercy—if you would only give me a few hours to reflect——Yes, I am sure you will!—you know that a woman, unless utterly depraved, cannot abandon herself to a man all in an instant——"

"She really takes it somewhat better than I thought," said Makepeace to himself: "and perhaps it would be as well——"

"Oh, I see that you will grant my prayer," she exclaimed, clasping her hands entreatingly: "yes, you will grant my prayer! Not another word need pass between us, neither this evening nor during the day to-morrow——But to-morrow night, between eleven and twelve o'clock—when the house is all quiet——And now leave me!" she abruptly added.

Makepeace was somewhat inclined to insist upon the achievement of his hoped-for conquest at the early period he had originally named: but he was in his heart naturally a coward—his craven spirit was not altogether superseded by the hardihood of his villany—and he had already gone as far as at the present time he dared go. He felt that his triumph was ensured for the appointment just given by the Countess; and after a few moments' hesitation, he nodded significantly and issued from the room.

"Good heavens!" thought the miserable Countess to herself, as she heard the door close behind him: "is it come to this?"—and she wrung her hands in despair.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE OATHS.

It was about eleven o'clock at night when the Countess of Lascelles issued from her own bedchamber and advanced into the passage with a taper in her hand. She was completely dressed, just the same as when she had retired from the drawing-room half an hour previously: for she had dispensed with the attendance of her tirewomen on some plea or another. She had made up her mind how to act: she purposed to see the Earl of Lascelles and tell him everything that had occurred. At first it was her intention to put off this proceeding until the morrow: but then she recollected from Makepeace's eavesdropping, how dangerous it was to discourse with Adolphus on particular subjects when the domestics of the establishment were about during the day-time; and moreover she felt that it would be utterly impossible for her to seek her couch until she had unburthened her mind to him who was so recently her paramour.

Pale as death was the Countess of Lascelles as she threaded the passage: the light playing upon her countenance gave it an additional wanness—and with the corpse-like face, and dressed in her sable garb, she looked like some restless visitant from another world.

She tapped gently at the door of the young Earl's suite of apartments: she knew there was no danger of being overheard by any other inmate of the house—for the sleeping-chambers of the domestics were all at a distance—and Isabella Vincent, be it recollected, was not at the mansion. At first Ethel's summons elicited no response: she knocked again—then she heard rapid footsteps approaching through the ante-chamber—and the voice of Adolphus demanded curtly, "Who is there?"

"It is I," responded Ethel: "and it is of vital consequence that we should have a few words together."

There was a dead silence of several moments on the other side of the door, as if Adolphus were deliberating with himself whether he should open it or not: then suddenly Ethel heard a key turn in the lock—the door opened—she passed into the ante-chamber, and found the young Earl still completely dressed: for no more than herself was he as yet able to court repose in bed.

"Ethel, what means this?" he asked, having closed the door after she had entered: and then he surveyed her attentively for several instants. "Surely it is not a revival of love," he added bitterly, "which has brought you hither?"

"A truce to levity!" said the Countess. "Things have come to such a pass that they are driving me to distraction! We will not again enter upon accusation and recrimination——"

"Ah! then you are come to confess?" ejaculated the young Earl: "and I thank God that it is so!"

"Dare you take the name of God thus in vain?" asked Ethel, with a voice and look of solemn reproach. "O Adolphus——"

"Yes," interrupted the Earl. "I dare appeal to my Maker to attest my vow of innocence in respect to that crime."

"Oh, hear me, Almighty God!" said the Countess, slowly sinking upon her knees, and raising her hands upward with an air of most solemn adjuration,—"hear me while I proclaim my innocence of that dreadful deed; and let thy thunderbolt——"

"Ethel, Ethel! for heaven's sake," exclaimed Adolphus, in horror-stricken dismay, "invoke not a chastisement which may perhaps be only too surely hurled down upon your head!"

"Silence! interrupt me not!" responded the Countess. "But listen while I call heaven's thunderbolt to smite me dead at your feet if I am giving utterance to a falsehood!"

"What does this mean? what *can* it mean?" exclaimed the young Earl, in an almost stupified astonishment. "There is an air of sincerity about you——sincerity too in your words——"

"Yes, sincerity," added the Countess with the same solemn emphasis as before, "because I am speaking the truth! You *feel* it as I *know* it. Look at me, Adolphus! Have I the air of a guilty woman?"—and rising up from her knees as she thus spoke, she regarded him steadily in the face. "But you, O Adolphus! I conjure you——"

"Nay, observe!" he interrupted her; and now his own look, manner, and voice were replete with a solemn sense of awe; "that same vow which you have taken, do I dare repeat:"—and he sank down upon his knees at the same time.

"Adolphus," cried the Countess, "add not perjury——"

"Silence!" he exclaimed, in a tone which made her stop short suddenly: and starting back a pace or two she became transfixed to the spot.

Then Adolphus repeated in solemn averment of his own innocence, that same oath which she had taken in respect to herself: and she heard and looked on in silence. He rose up from his suppliant posture: he gazed upon her with an earnest, steadfast scrutiny: she looked upon him in a similar manner.

"Would you swear that oath upon the Bible?" he at length asked: and still more searching was his gaze, as if to penetrate into the nethermost depths of her soul.

"I could repeat that oath upon the Bible," she answered: and though her countenance continued deadly pale, yet was her look firm—quailing not for a single moment. "But would you?"

"Yes! Behold me!" ejaculated Adolphus: and hastening to a book-shelf he took down a copy of the sacred volume.

"Then let us swear!" said Ethel. "But if the deed lie not between us two——"

"Oh, if it did not," exclaimed Adolphus, quivering with the strength of his emotions,—"if we could only convince each other that it did not ——But, Ah! Ethel, there is *one* test—and, alas! alas! I fear that you could not bring yourself to pass through it!"

"Still suspicious against me?" said the Countess: "and I who, more generous, was beginning to have faith in you and to believe that we had both hitherto been the victims of some horrible mystery—some hideous crime perpetrated by another! But enough! What is this test? There is no ordeal that I will flinch from encountering to convince you of my innocence! But, alas! Adolphus——"

"Suspicious now in your turn?" he ejaculated: then in a solemn voice, and with a corresponding look, he said, "Would you accompany me, Ethel, to the chamber in which the deed itself was perpetrated? would you stand with me by the side of the couch on which the murdered victim lay—would you place your hand upon the very pillow which was pressed by his head—would you in the other hand grasp the holy volume and then swear——"

"Yes," interrupted Ethel, "I would do all that! But you, Adolphus——"

"And I likewise!" responded the young Earl. "Truly there must have been some hideous, horrible mistake: for surely, surely such dread perjury——"

"I am incapable of it!" ejaculated Ethel. "Of what need to perjure myself to *you?* Would it not be the most unnecessary of crimes?"

"Yes—and on my part the same!" replied Adolphus: "the most unnecessary of crimes! I know not how it is, but an idea has sprung up in my mind, that we perhaps have been too harsh to each other—each too quick in arriving at a conclusion! But, Oh! if it were so——But, no, no! it is impossible!—the deed must lie between us two—and I know that for myself——"

"And I know likewise for myself," ejaculated Ethel, warmly and impatiently, "that——" but suddenly curbing her returning anger, she added in a solemn tone, "Come, let us do as you have said—let us proceed to the chamber where the terrible deed took place: and, Oh! it is with a light conscience in *that* respect that I shall swear the oath upon the sacred volume!"

With these words the Countess of Lascelles took up the taper which she had brought with her: but as she lifted it from the table somewhat rapidly, it flickered almost to extinction: and Adolphus said, "We must have a better light than this: we must look well in each other's countenance. Proceed, Ethel: I will join you in a moment."

He hastened into his bed-chamber, and returned with a lamp which threw forth a strong glare. In silence they proceeded from the ante-room: still in silence too, and with noiseless steps like stealthily walking ghosts, they passed along the passage—and in a minute reached the door of the dressing-room where the late Earl had been wont to perform his somewhat elaborate toilet under the auspices of Makepeace. As if smitten with the same feeling and at the same moment, the young Earl and the Countess flung their looks upon each other: the countenance of each was pale, but full of firm and solemn resolve. They spoke not a word. Adolphus opened the door of the dressing-room, and with the habitual courtesy which in respect to a female prevails with every well-bred man under any circumstances, he stood aside to suffer Ethel to enter first. Without the slightest hesitation she crossed the threshhold: she lingered not in the dressing-room for Adolphus to come close up with her as she opened the door of communication with the bed-chamber—that chamber which had proved the scene of the terrific tragedy!

She entered the chamber—Adolphus quickly followed—and once more did they exchange rapid looks, as if each were curious, or we should rather say *anxious* to ascertain what demeanour was now borne by the other. And both countenances were still expressive of firmness, mingled with a solemn awe.

The young Earl of Lascelles deposited the lamp upon a table; and holding the bible in one hand, he advanced towards the bed, Ethel keeping close by his side.

"Suffer me to take the oath first," said the Countess; "and if for an instant," she added, "I may have appeared to shudder as I thus approach this couch, it was not in trepidation on account of the oath that I am about to take—but through horrified remembrance of the spectacle which I beheld in this apartment the last time that I was here."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that all traces of the hideous tragedy had been cleansed or removed away from the chamber, and that no one unless previously acquainted with the fact, could for an instant have suspected that any such foul crime had been perpetrated there.

"And I too shuddered for an instant," said Adolphus, "and for the same reason! Can you depict to yourself, Ethel, the whole of that dread spectacle? can you lay your hand upon the satin coverlid of this couch, and fancy within yourself that it is upon the cold corpse of the deceased you are placing that hand as if that corpse were indeed here still? And if such be the impression under which, assisted by your imagination, you are now standing here—than take this book, kiss it, and swear that you are innocent of your late husband's death!"

Unhesitatingly did the Countess of Lascelles receive the book in one hand, while she placed the other upon the pillow of the bed; and when Adolphus had dictated to her an oath couched in terms alike the most solemn and the most terrible—when too in a firm voice she had repeated word for word all that he thus dictated—she kissed the sacred volume—adding in the same tone of solemn resolute confidence, "I swear!"

When this was done, Adolphus gazed upon her for a few moments with the most searching scrutiny—a scrutiny from which she neither quailed nor shrank, but which she endured with the air of one who was indeed innocent of a foul crime and who had no cause to dread the fathoming of the inmost recesses of her heart—at least not upon *that* score. The Earl received back the book from her hand, and made a sign for her to commence the administration of the oath unto himself. She repeated precisely the same formula as that which he had dictated to her; and he, with an equal air of sincerity—with the same outward appearance of confidence—with the same absence of any trace of a guilty conscience's internal whispering—pressed the book to his lips and said, "I swear!"

Then the Countess of Lascelles gazed upon him with as deep and earnest a scrutiny as that which she herself had ere now undergone; and he bore it as unflinchingly and as firmly.

"Yes, Adolphus," she said, "you are innocent!"

"And you, Ethel," he replied, "you also are innocent!"

But did their former love spring up again in their hearts, now that the hideous nightmare of suspicion was lifted also from the soul of each?—did they fly into each other's arms? were their hands instantaneously clasped? Not so. It is true that they now beheld each other in a different light: but that love of their's—once so strong—so impassioned, and so tender—had received a shock from which recovery was impossible. A blight had fallen upon it, as upon the most beauteous flower which never again must raise its drooping head from beneath that withering influence. And they gazed upon each other with looks of embarrassment and constraint: yet the same feeling was in both hearts alike—for each knew that though suspicion was set at rest for ever, yet that the wide gulf which had opened between them could never be completely bridged—that love was done for them—and that even friendship's self would lack the warmth which might enable them to go hand-in-hand with cheerfulness through the world thenceforth.

All of a sudden they heard a sound as if the outer door of the dressing-room was opening. Again were their glances quickly turned upon one another: but no superstitious fear was expressed in their looks;—and then their eyes were rapidly flung in the direction of the chamber-door itself; for footsteps were traversing the dressing-room. This last-mentioned door was opened slowly; and a man appeared upon the threshold. That man was Makepeace.

He was only half dressed: his countenance was ghastly pale—his features were rigid: his eyes, wide open, seemed to be staring upon vacancy, as if the images reflected in them remained only upon the retina and were carried not in unto the brain. Yes—it was indeed evident that those eyes imparted to the man himself no more sense of the objects which were imaged there, than the polished mirror could know of the things which its surface reflected. Adolphus and Ethel stood back in silent horror: for it was indeed with a feeling of horror they were now smitten, as the truth burst upon them. Makepeace was visiting that chamber of the tragedy in a state of somnambulism!

The valet advanced towards the bed,—taking not the slightest notice of Adolphus or the Countess, although if his eyes had possessed the active sense of vision as well as the mere inert faculty, he could not have failed to see them. He bore no light in his hand: yet he was startled not by the glare of the lamp that was burning upon the table. Towards the bed he went, as we have just said: he extended his arms across it—he gesticulated in a strange manner for a few moments—his features, relaxing from their rigidity, became violently convulsed—his eyes rolled in their sockets, as if with the intense horror of the feelings that now inspired him. Adolphus and Ethel remained motionless and silent—standing aside, but close together—gazing on this dread spectacle; and for an instant they thought that Makepeace beheld them—recognised them—and was about to address them, as his looks seemed to settle upon them both. But his eyes, having now suddenly ceased to roll, glanced only with a glassy and inanimate light—not as if the mind itself, with the sense peculiar to those orbs, were shining through them. Then the man slowly turned away; and still wrapped in a profound slumber—still iron-bound by the influence of somnambulism—still proceeding mechanically as if a mere walking automaton—he took his departure from the chamber, shutting the door behind him; and a few moments afterwards Adolphus and Ethel heard the outer door—namely, that of the dressing-room—likewise close.

"Oh, we have indeed been most unjust towards each other!" cried Adolphus, turning his looks upon the Countess. "For that man——"

"Yes—we have been most unjust!" replied Ethel: "for the horrible mystery is now cleared up—and that man is the murderer of his master!"

"Come, let us leave this chamber," said the young Earl; "and thankful ought we to be to Providence for having brought us hither on this occasion, to behold what we have just seen. It is a mercy which we perhaps little deserved at the hands of heaven!"

"And in remembrance thereof," exclaimed the Countess fervidly, "all the remainder of my life shall be so spent as to prove an atonement for the past!"

They issued forth together—and returned to the ante-chamber where Ethel had previously sought Adolphus.

"Our conversation took such a turn," said the Countess, "almost immediately after I joined you here just now, "that I totally lost sight of the real object for which I came. Ah! little, little did I foresee that events were to flow into such a channel as to lead to the mutual conviction of each others innocence! I came just now to tell you, Adolphus, that the villain Makepeace,—he whom we have now discovered, beyond the possibility of doubt, to be the assassin of the master who was at least so good and kind to him—he whose guilty conscience conducts him, amidst the restless slumbers of the night, to the scene of his foul crime——"

"What more has this man done?" asked the young Earl. "I see that there is something hanging heavy upon your mind, Ethel—or rather provoking your indignant sense of sore outrage? And I too am smarting under the recollection of the miscreant's conduct to me ere now——"

"He sought me in the drawing-room," responded Ethel, "some little while after you had left me—he made insolent advances—I felt that I was in his power—he threatened—and, O Adolphus! though I knew myself to be innocent, yet I dreaded lest if that man were to tell his tale, *you* would go to the scaffold——"

"By heaven, Ethel!" interrupted the Earl with impassioned vehemence, "it was the same that I said to myself when I submitted to the extortionate demand he made upon me? For I dreaded lest *you*, Ethel, should be dragged ignominiously before a tribunal, and from a tribunal to the scaffold!"

The young nobleman and the Countess now related to each other everything that had respectively taken place with themselves in reference to Makepeace; and hence it appeared that whereas on the one hand Adolphus had taken time for the payment of the money, so on the other hand had Ethel obtained a reprieve—though a brief one—in respect to the surrender of herself to the embraces of Makepeace.

"The circumstances which have this night transpired," said Adolphus, "are not merely accidental—they have been ordained by heaven to place us on the right track for the discovery and punishment of the murderer. For our own guilt, Ethel, towards that deceased old man, we have indeed been chastised: the horrible state of suspicion in which we have existed since his death, has proved a punishment ample enough, let us hope, to satisfy heaven's sternest sense of justice. And now let us separate. Retire you to your chamber: perhaps you may repose more peaceably for the rest of this night than you have hitherto done——and I shall retire to rest in fullest confidence that heaven will not leave unfinished the work which it has just commenced."

"What course do you purpose to adopt?" asked Ethel: "for remember, Adolphus, that as yet there is but slight evidence to satisfy the world of this man's guilt, though with ourselves it is placed beyond the possibility of doubt."

"I can give you no decisive answer for the present," responded the young Earl. "It is a subject which must be deliberated upon, and which likewise depends upon circumstances which evidently are not altogether in our own hands, but under the guidance of that heaven which has thus so strangely but so mercifully placed us on the right track. And now good night, Ethel."

"Good night, Adolphus:"—and without a hand being shaken between them—but still with a far different feeling towards each other from that which they had entertained until within this hour—they separated.

On the following day, soon after breakfast, a letter was received from Mrs. Gardiner,—to the effect that favourable tidings had been obtained relative to Miss Vincent, who was quite safe and well: but she (Mrs. Gardiner) had only a moment's time to pen this hasty announcement for the satisfaction of the Earl and of the Countess, inasmuch as she was just on the point of setting off to rejoin Miss Vincent at Ramsgate. The housekeeper concluded by promising to write further particulars on the following day, unless she should find on her arrival at Verner House—which was her destination—that Miss Vincent herself had written complete details to the Earl and her ladyship.

"But Isabella has *not* written to us," said Adolphus; "and I am tortured with the idea that she suspects something dreadful on our part. It is for you to write to her, Ethel! Write confidentially to her—tell her that providential circumstances have afforded us a clue to the discovery of the murderer of her uncle—hesitate not to mention the name of Makepeace—for the sooner Isabella's mind is disabused of any horrible suspicion against either you or me—or perhaps both of us—the better!"

"I will not fail to write," answered the Countess. "And you, Adolphus—what course have you decided upon?"

"I am now going to consult an attorney, to whom I shall communicate everything," Adolphus replied; "and I know that his counsel will be given in a friendly as well as prudential spirit."

Makepeace—utterly unaware of the fact of his somnambulism—utterly unsuspicious therefore of the storm that was gathering above his head, and threatening to turn the tables completely against himself—heard with satisfaction the Earl's order for the carriage to be gotten in immediate readiness: for the villanous valet thought that the young nobleman was about to go and investigate his financial affairs for the purpose of providing the sum of ten thousand pounds according to the arrangement already made.

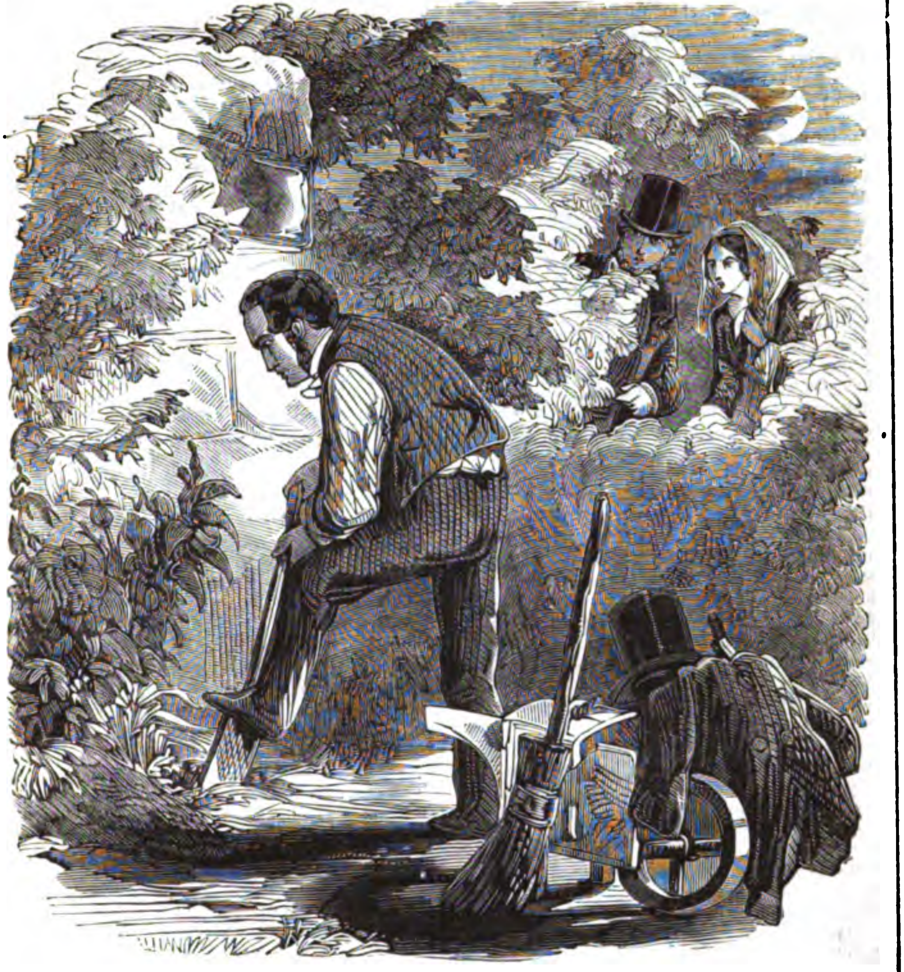
Adolphus remained absent for several hours, during which Ethel experienced some degree of anxiety: for she felt the necessity of the adoption of speedy measures in order to bring the crime completely home to Makepeace, and thus extricate herself from the power which the villain might otherwise still continue to wield with regard to her. It was between four and five in the afternoon when Adolphus returned to the mansion; and he was accompanied by his solicitor, Mr. Slater,—who, it was intimated to the domestics, would remain to dinner. Adolphus found an opportunity of speaking a few words to Ethel,—conveying a brief outline of the plan which was to be adopted under existing circumstances; and then retiring to his own chamber for the purpose of changing his toilet, he desired his valet to bid Makepeace attend upon him at once.

"I find," said the young Earl, when Makepeace entered into his presence—and it was with no small difficulty that Adolphus could keep a mask upon his countenance to conceal all that he inwardly felt in respect to the murderer,—"I find that by devoting a few hours' attention to my pecuniary affairs, I shall be enabled the first thing to-morrow morning, to dispose of the sum which you require. I have no doubt you are as ready and willing as I myself am that this business should be settled with the least possible delay. Mr. Slater has brought all his papers with him; and after dinner I purpose to go over them with him. In any case you may fully understand that early to-morrow morning, immediately after breakfast, you will receive the sum which you have demanded of me; and you will therefore at the same time fulfil your part of the compact by leaving the mansion the instant you have the money in your possession."

"It shall be so, my lord," responded Makepeace, inwardly chuckling at the idea that everything was going on so favourably to his own mercenary views.

On retiring from the presence of the young nobleman, Makepeace proceeded to ascertain where the Countess was, in order that he might remind her of the appointment for the coming night, as he supposed it to be the last one which he would have to pass within those walls, and he was resolved that Ethel should not escape from becoming the victim of his passion, if indeed it was in his power by threats and coercion to hold her to her agreement. Makepeace discovered that as it still wanted a good hour to dinner-time, Mr. Slater had proceeded to the library, where he had covered the table with deeds and documents, in the midst of which he seemed to be buried—while on the other hand the Countess was alone in the drawing-room. Thither Makepeace accordingly proceeded; and accosting Ethel, he said, "My lady, remember your promise for to-night!"

"It is impossible that it can be kept," answered the Countess: and admirably well playing her part, she said, "Now do not bend those angry



looks upon me. I am not the mistress of my own actions. The Earl has suddenly taken it into his head to have Mr. Slater here to settle all financial matters: for his lordship will leave for the Continent to-morrow."

"Ah indeed! for the Continent?" ejaculated the valet: and then he muttered to himself, "This, then, accounts for the abruptness with which he is resolved to settle his affairs——But why," he asked of Ethel, "does Mr. Slater's presence here make any difference——"

"Because," replied the Countess, "my signature is required to certain deeds relative to the property which devolves upon myself, my jointure, and so forth; and I must sit up to-night to give that signature. Mr. Slater has intimated to me, with an expression of concern for the trouble thus caused, that it may be one or two o'clock in the morning before the business will be terminated."

Not for a single instant did Makepeace suspect the truth of all these statements: indeed they seemed perfectly natural—and Ethel delivered herself of them with an appearance of the utmost sincerity. The valet reflected for a few moments: he thought to himself that it would be supremely ridiculous for him to loosen his hold upon the Countess; and as he had all along intended to render her his victim in more ways than one, he was well pleased to learn that the Earl was going abroad, as he flattered himself that it would leave the Countess all the more completely defenceless and at his mercy.

"Well, my lady!" he said, "there appears to be no help for it to-night: but if the Earl does really depart to-morrow, you may expect me to pay you a visit at about eleven to-morrow night——for which purpose you can leave unlocked the window of that ground-floor room you used latterly to occupy in the old Earl's time: and I shall have no difficulty in finding my way to where you will receive me with open arms. Or, what will be better still, you can shift your quarters back to that room and save me a world of trouble. Take care, my lady, that you follow my injunctions and do exactly as I bid: or else——"

The villanous valet threw a look of dark and menacing significancy upon the Countess, who had some difficulty in so far subduing the sense of loathing and abhorrence which she felt towards that man, as to be enabled to give him a calm response in accordance with all he demanded at her hands; and he issued from the room. Between this time and the dinner-hour Adolphus and the Countess had no opportunity of exchanging a word in private together. When the dinner was over, Mr. Slater and Adolphus adjourned to the library, where they deliberated upon the plan which they had in view for the complete detection of Makepeace: for it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that the tale of so much important business being in hand that would extend deep into the night, was a mere pretext, having two purposes to serve—the first to prevent Makepeace from suspiciously regarding the lawyer's presence at the mansion; and the second to afford Ethel an excuse for breaking her appointment with that same infamous person.

The twilight was deepening into the shades of night, when Adolphus issued from the library, and sought the grounds for the purpose of cooling his brain, which was fevered and excited by the incidents that were now in progress. He had not been in the garden many minutes before he encountered Ethel: for she had come forth to walk for the very same purpose. She now told Adolphus all that had taken place between herself and Makepeace during the hour which preceded dinner: for though Mr. Slater had been made acquainted with every detail of the valet's insolent hopes and intentions, yet the topic was too delicate a one for the Countess to touch upon in that gentleman's presence.

"Everything progresses well," said Adolphus: "Makepeace is entirely off his guard—or rather he is lulled into the utmost security. But, Ah! what sound was that?"

"Hush!" said Ethel, in a low voice. "Let us listen."

They stopped short; and it appeared to them as if they heard the noise of some one digging up the earth at a little distance. This noise was so low as to render them still uncertain whether they rightly interpreted its cause: but as every incident now appeared to them to be invested with an importance bearing upon their own circumstances, they resolved to ascertain what these sounds could mean. Noiselessly they advanced over the grass-plat in the direction of the spot whence those sounds appeared to come,—until they both fancied that they beheld something white moving behind a clump of evergreens. Nearer still did they advance,—their footsteps unheard upon the soft grass, and both threading their way amongst the shrubs and the parterres of flowers with so much caution as not to ruffle a single leaf,—until they were near enough to see what was going on, without themselves being seen. A man with his coat and waistcoat off, was digging in that spot, which was the remotest corner of the grounds, and also the most densely embowered in trees. It was his shirt which had shone white through the foliage and amidst the deepening obscurity of the evening. He was working hard, as if the task he had in hand must be speedily accomplished: he was working too with the fullest sense of security and in confidence of remaining undisturbed at that hour when all the domestics were in the servants' hall, and when he fancied the Earl, the Countess, and Mr. Slater to be deep in the midst of deeds and parchments in the library. For this man was Makepeace.

Adolphus and Ethel were at once smitten with the conviction that this was some new phase which must develope itself in the growing chain of evidence against the murderer of the old Earl; and in breathless suspense they continued gazing upon his proceedings, they themselves taking care to continue unseen. They had not tarried many minutes on the spot before they perceived Makepeace stoop down; and from the hole which he had digged, he drew forth an object which appeared to be a stone jar, about a foot and a half high and of a proportionate width. At the same instant there was a low but still plainly audible chink of gold coins within the jar, or vase, as Makepeace deposited it upon the ground. He then proceeded to shovel back the earth with all possible despatch: Adolphus touched Ethel as a signal that they must retire; and they accordingly retreated as cautiously and as noiselessly as they had advanced towards that spot.

Re-entering the mansion, they hastened to the library to inform Mr. Slater of all that they had just seen; and he was as much struck as themselves by the importance of the incident. That the vase contained the golden temptation for which the crime had been perpetrated, there could be scarcely any doubt; and that the guilty valet was now disinterring his treasure in order that he might convey it to his own room and consign it to his trunk in readiness for his departure on the following morning, was equally clear. The web of circumstantial evidence was visibly and rapidly closing in around the murderer.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE MURDERER.

A LITTLE before ten on this same night of which we are writing, Adolphus gave orders for his travelling-carriage to be in readiness at nine o'clock in the morning; and at the same time he intimated that the domestics might retire to bed at their usual hour, no one being needed to sit up for himself, the Countess, or Mr. Slater, as they had business to transact which would possibly keep them in the library far into the night.

By eleven o'clock the mansion was silent—the lights were extinguished in all the chambers of the domestics, who had retired about half an hour previously. Adolphus now issued from the library, carrying a light in his hand, and followed by Mr. Slater. They ascended the private staircase, and reached the passage whence opened the suite of apartments occupied by the late Earl. Traversing the dressing-room, they passed into the bed-chamber: and there Adolphus, having deposited the light upon the toilet-table, left the solicitor by himself. The young Earl then rejoined the Countess of Lascelles in the library.

We may as well observe that Mr. Slater was a man of about forty years of age—intelligent and strong-minded—and by no means prone to superstitious fears. He had therefore unhesitatingly volunteered to become the temporary occupant of the chamber where the horrible murder was committed, in the hope that the proceeding might have a particular issue.

The attorney, when left to himself, merely threw off his coat and waistcoat, and lay down beneath the coverlid. As the reader may very well suppose, he had no inclination for sleep, inasmuch as he had a special task to perform. He therefore lay broad awake, anxiously awaiting the first sound that might indicate the occurrence of that which was expected.

About three-quarters of an hour thus elapsed, when Mr. Slater heard the outer door—namely, that of the dressing-room—opening; and in a few moments the chamber-door itself was affording ingress to some one. The light still burnt upon the toilet-table; and the somnambulist Makepeace—half-dressed, as on the preceding night—with his features rigid, and his eyes fixed as if in a vague glassy stare—approached the couch. Mr. Slater lay perfectly still, awaiting what would happen. Makepeace bent partially over the bed; and extending his hands, appeared to be feeling for a form that might be sleeping there. His right hand gently touched the lawyer's throat; and the somnambulist drew that hand rapidly away, with the horribly faithful imitation of the manner in which he had no doubt drawn the murderous weapon across the throat of the old nobleman.

"Murderer!" ejaculated Mr. Slater: and springing up, he forcibly grasped the arms of the valet.

It would be impossible to describe the perfect agony of terror—the wildering consternation of horror, which seized upon the guilty wretch as he was thus startled from his sleep, and as his brain was smitten with all the harrowing ideas of detection in the crime which he had been in fancy re-enacting.

"Murderer! confess!" exclaimed the lawyer, not leaving Makepeace a moment to collect his ideas or to recover from the fearful shock which he had just sustained.

"I will, I will!" he piteously moaned. "Forgive me, my lord—I meant to do it——I am very wicked——"

And then, all in an instant, recognising the attorney, Makepeace gave vent to a wild cry of terror and anguish; and sinking upon his knees, he poured forth a perfect volley of ejaculations and entreaties for mercy.

Mr. Slater rang the bell violently; and Adolphus, who had been anxiously expecting this summons, was the first to answer it. Several of the male domestics, springing from their beds, and huddling on a few clothes, sped in the same direction: for the solicitor, with one hand firmly clutching the arm of Makepeace, with the other hand continued tugging at the bell even after the young Earl of Lascelles had entered the bed-chamber. And the sound of this bell was heard likewise by Ethel, to whom the intelligence was thereby conveyed that the detection of Makepeace was complete.

When Adolphus rushed into the chamber, the miserable murderer covered his face with his hands, groaning and sobbing audibly.

"He has confessed! he has confessed!" shouted Slater, who was all the while pulling at the bell. "Let us raise the entire household!—let every one know that the assassin is discovered!"

"Mercy! mercy!" groaned Makepeace,—as if it were possible that he would be allowed to escape, which was the only mercy that could be afforded by those who had him in their custody.

"He has confessed the crime!" reiterated Slater: "heaven itself has at length brought it home to him! Wretched being, did you not know—did you not suspect that you walked in your sleep?"

"No! no!" moaned the miserable man, evidently under the influence of the most appalling horror and consternation.

"Had you no idea," continued the lawyer, with rapid and excited utterance, "that you thus wandered about—that an invisible but irresistible hand guided you to the scene of your foul iniquity?"

"My God, no!" groaned Makepeace, quivering with the indescribable horror of his feelings.

"Blaspheme not, wretch!" ejaculated Slater: "invoke not the sacred name of the Almighty, miscreant that you are! Had you no idea that——"

Several of the male domestics—who, as we have already stated, were roused from their beds—now entered the room; and the scene which burst upon them was eloquently expressive of the truth. Makepeace was still upon his knees,—his eyes glaring in wild horror: Slater still retained a hold upon him: Adolphus, with arms folded, was leaning against the bedpost, gazing upon the murderer with looks of deepest loathing and aversion. The fact that such a scene as this should occur in the very chamber where the foul tragedy had been perpetrated, was sufficient to strike the entering domestics with a full idea of its horrible significancy.

"He has confessed the crime!" reiterated Mr. Slater, who had now desisted from pulling at the bell; "and he will not dare deny it! But if he did, of what use? Look at his countenance now!—Murder's very name is written in blood upon it!"

The domestics fell shudderingly back a pace or two: for there was something fearful indeed in the thought of being in the presence of the wretch who had committed so terrible a crime. It was the same sensation as if they had suddenly found themselves approaching near a huge coiled-up reptile, to touch the slimy folds of which would have been to send a strong tremor quivering throughout their entire forms. And no pen can describe the mingled horror and anguish—the wild internal agony that was fast asserting its empire over the previous influence of consternation and dismay,—that *now* held possession of the murderer.

"Had you no idea," proceeded Slater,—who, cool though he naturally were, and calm as he had at first been when taking up his quarters in that room, was now considerably excited,—"had you no idea that the slumbers of such a wretch as you could not possibly be tranquil, and that you yourself ought to have mistrusted them lest they should prove the very season and means of leading you into circumstances proper for your detection? Would you believe it?" cried the solicitor, glancing round upon those present: "he came stealthily up to the bed, just as he no doubt advanced when about to accomplish his horrible deed——"

"And as he advanced thither last night!" interjected Adolphus mechanically, at the same time shuddering at the reminiscence itself, as well as at all the associations which it conjured up in his mind.

"Ah! last night?" muttered Makepeace, catching at the young Earl's words, and thereby recalled, as it were, to a sense of all the recent past as well as of the frightful present;—and then he all in a moment comprehended how it was that measures had been so promptly taken to turn the tables against him.

"What did he say?" exclaimed Mr. Slater, who did not catch the murderer's words: then, without waiting for any one to give him a response—and still labouring under a strong excitement, from the effect of the scene which had just occurred, and which he was now about to describe—he went on to say, "Yes, he stole up to the bed—he felt about as if to ascertain exactly where I was lying—he drew his hand across my throat——"

Groans of horror burst forth from the domestics previously assembled, and from the lips of others who were now entering the room. Makepeace himself groaned; and not for an instant did he dare deny all that had been said.

"Ah! now I bethink me," ejaculated Mr. Slater, "the crock—the jar——"

"Yes—the golden temptation," said Adolphus, "for which the deed was perpetrated!"

Makepeace gazed with a renewed bewilderment of consternation upon the solicitor and the young Earl. Not that this new discovery struck him as making his case one atom worse than it was before: but the wretched man was surprised to find the various evidences of his guilt thus magically transpiring as it were—accumulating upon him—striking him blow upon blow.

"Keep charge of him—keep charge of him!" exclaimed Mr. Slater. "You, my lord, will remain here to watch over him——Or what is better still, convey him to some place of security until the police can be fetched! Let some one run to the nearest station-house!—and let a couple of you accompany me to the wretch's chamber! I know it not," added the lawyer to the two foremost domestics who volunteered to go with him: "you must lead the way."

The three quitted the room accordingly: Adolphus remained with some six or seven others, keeping guard upon Makepeace; while one of the footmen, who happened to be completely dressed, hastened off to procure the succour of the police. Until this moment Makepeace had remained upon his knees: for it must be comprehended that what it has taken us some time to relate, in reality occupied but a few minutes in its dramatic action. The instant, however, the lawyer and those domestics had quitted the chamber, Makepeace rose up, and signalled his wish to have a few words with the young Earl of Lascelles.

"Whatsoever you have to say, must be said aloud," observed Adolphus, "in the presence of these witnesses:"—and though he spoke with accents of stern severity, yet he inwardly trembled lest his past amour with Ethel should be revealed and her honour ruined beyond redemption.

"Your lordship had better suffer me to speak to you in private," said Makepeace, gradually recovering somewhat of his presence of mind, if not a certain hardihood, with the consciousness that though he were a reptile soon to be trampled to death under the heel of human justice, he had still the sting in his head and his envenomed tongue could inflict no insignificant wound.

For an instant Adolphus was irresolute how to act—but only for an instant. A second thought showed him that no matter what the consequences might be—however fatal to the honour of Ethel, and however damnatory of his own reputation, inasmuch as he passed before the world as the son of the late Earl, and consequently as the son-in-law of her with whom he might now perhaps be accused of having intrigued,—yet notwithstanding all these considerations, he knew, we say, that he dared not appear to have any secrets with a murderer—much less to be thought capable of making terms with such a wretch.

"I will grant you no private audience," he said in resolute accents.

"Your lordship can step aside with me into one corner," answered Makepeace, whose keen eye had caught that temporary indecision on the young nobleman's part: "we can whisper together—or these men can withdraw into the dressing-room for a few minutes——"

"And leave his lordship alone with *you*?" ejaculated several voices, accompanied by looks of horror and abhorrence. "No, no!—you would kill him as you did his poor old father!"

"His lordship knows," said Makepeace, white as a sheet at the hideous taunt, "whether it be more conducive to his interest to listen to me in private or to compel me to speak out."

This invitation for a secret audience, so unmistakeably given, accompanied too with a sort of threat, more than ever compelled Adolphus to take a resolute stand, despite all consequences: and he said firmly, "I remain here to keep guard over you—but not to listen to aught that you may have to communicate. Wretched man! would you not do better to show contrition—to think only of your own awful predicament——"

"Enough of this!" interrupted Makepeace, with increasing hardihood. "I see that it is all over with me, and I must swing for it—or else ——But no matter! My business with life is pretty nearly done—I must die—and *that* speedily too: but I will not perish unavenged! My lord, here, in the presence of your domestics——"

"Silence, villain!" ejaculated Adolphus, now fearfully excited—so that the servants gazed upon him in mingled wonder and suspicion.

"You cannot seal my lips," said Makepeace: "and everything shall now come out. You know that you intrigued with your own mother-in-law!"

Adolphus staggered back, his countenance ghastly white: and the domestics present were naturally enough smitten with the conviction of their master's guilt of the crime just imputed to him.

"Yes, you were the lover of your own father's wife!" continued Makepeace; "and now every one may understand, if they did not comprehend it before, why the Countess occupied a separate room so long—and that ground-floor room too!"

Adolphus groaned audibly: he could not possibly deny the accusation levelled against him: it was true that he might palliate it by proclaiming the secret of his birth—but this he dared not do: it would have been equivalent to the laying down of his titles and the abandonment of his riches all in an instant! The domestics were convinced of the truth of what Makepeace had just said, murderer though he were—for the ghastly looks, the quivering form, and the horrified appearance of the young Earl, bore fullest corroboration of the tale. And then, too, the servants quickly called to mind countless little circumstances which had never before made any particular impression upon them, but which now all combined as damning evidence against their master.

"There!" said Makepeace, as if in horrible exultation at the exposure he had made, "it is all out now—and though I may die on the gallows, yet *you*, my lord, who have cheated me out of my ten thousand pounds—and your beautiful mother-in-law, who cheated me out of her favours—are hopelessly ruined before the world!"

At this instant the lawyer re-appeared, followed by the two servants who had accompanied him, and one of whom carried a stone jar, whence came the chinking sound of gold.

"It was in his room—carefully packed in his box!" exclaimed the attorney. "We forced the box, and we found it!"

"There is no use in denying the whole truth now," said Makepeace; "and if others would only be just as candid, he added, flinging a look of diabolical malignity upon Adolphus, "it would be seen that murder and robbery are not the only crimes that have been committed under this roof!"

"Wretch!" exclaimed Slater with indignation; "think you that for a moment you will mend your own position——But here are the police!"

And it was so. A sergeant and a couple of constables made their appearance, accompanied by the domestic who had been to fetch them; and Makepeace was consigned to their custody. That portion of his apparel in which he was deficient—he having been only half-dressed during his somnambulism—was fetched from his chamber; and for a moment, when the handcuffs were put upon him, he winced and turned more ghastly pale than before: but quickly recovering himself, he re-assumed a bold insolent hardihood, and again vociferated forth the tale of the young nobleman's amour with the Countess. Those who had not previously heard it from his lips, were amazed and shocked; the Earl turned aside, groaning with the horror of his anguished, outraged, harrowing feelings; while Makepeace was borne off in the custody of the police-constables.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE CONFESSION.

MAKEPEACE was alone in a cell at the station-house to which he had been conducted. A profound darkness entombed him; and though the night was a warm one yet did he feel cold to the very marrow of his bones. The handcuffs were upon his wrists—his person had been rigorously searched—every incident and every idea tended to make him now frightfully aware of his awful position. That temporary hardihood which had taken possession of the man when he so cruelly avenged himself against Adolphus and the Countess, had now altogether forsaken him; and he felt profoundly dejected—so deeply, deeply desponding, that the very tears traced each other down his cheeks.

His imagination grew fevered; and from the midst of the darkness of the cell, a form gradually seemed to stand forth,—a gore-stained ghastly shape, slowly becoming plainer and plainer until to his excited imagination it seemed as if his old master's distorted countenance was gazing upon him. At first the wretch looked and looked while horror froze his veins: but at length, unable any longer to endure the presence of the spectre which his fevered fancy had conjured up, he shrieked aloud in his mental agony. The massive bolt of the door was drawn back—the bull's-eye light of a lantern flashed in unto the cell—and a constable asked, "What is the matter?"

"For heaven's sake, do not leave me alone!" exclaimed Makepeace: "or give me a light—— this darkness is terrible! But stay!—send for Mr. Slater—send for him at once! I would speak to him—and then perhaps my mind will be easier!"

"Yes—we will send for him," responded the constable. "I will leave you this light for a minute, while I despatch some one to the house; and in the meantime, if you wish it, I will remain with you."

The constable acted as he had said: a message was despatched to the mansion to Mr. Slater, and though this gentleman had retired to rest,—yet on hearing what was required of him, he immediately rose, hastily apparelled himself, and accompanied the messenger to the station-house. There he was at once introduced to the murderer's cell; and the constable who in the meanwhile had remained with the criminal, asked whether he should retire, or whether he should still continue there?

"Leave us alone together," said Makepeace, whose voice now sounded awfully hollow to the attorney's ears.

"One moment!" said the latter. "From the nature of the message just delivered to me, I conclude, Makepeace, that you purpose to volunteer a full and complete confession of your crime, with all its details. Is it so?"

"It is," was the sepulchrally uttered response.

"You must have a motive for making this confession," continued Mr. Slater. "Is it that at length smitten with remorse, you seek to offer the last and only atonement—poor indeed though it be—which man in such circumstances can make? Or is it that there are some secrets fitted for my ear alone?"

"There is no secret, sir," replied the murderer, "beyond that which relates to the circumstances of the dreadful deed itself."

"In this case," continued the lawyer, "you will have no objection for the confession to be taken down in writing?"

"None," was the murderer's reply: and his voice still sounded as hollow as an echo awakened in the deep gloom of some old cathedral crypt.

"It were better," proceeded the attorney, "that your confession should be made to the ears of two persons. You are sincere in your desire to make a clear breast of it at once—and therefore you cannot object——"

"No, sir," interrupted Makepeace, profoundly dejected; "I leave myself in your hands. Though I have already avowed my guilt, yet until I shall have explained it in all its details, it seems to constitute a secret that sits upon my heart like a weight of lead!"

"Procure writing-materials," said Mr. Slater to the constable. "Return with them, that you may act as a witness of the confession which this remorse-stricken being is about to make."

The constable withdrew; and during his temporary absence, a profound silence reigned in the cell—the eyes of Makepeace being bent downward, and the light of the lanthorn left by the officer, playing with a ghastly effect upon his pallid, haggard countenance, which wore an air of the deepest dejection. The constable returned; and Mr. Slater arranged the writing-materials in a manner as convenient as the circumstances of the cell would permit. Makepeace continued to be absorbed in his solemnly awful reverie for some minutes before he broke silence; and when he did again speak, his voice was lower and sounded more hollow, more sepulchral than hitherto.

"I mean at once to speak of the particular night when the crime was committed," began the murderer. "His lordship the late Earl had for some time slept apart from her ladyship; and it was my duty to attend upon him in his dressing-room whensoever he performed his toilet. On the evening in question, I attended his lordship in that dressing-room, as usual, when he was about to retire for the night; and this, as near as I can recollect, was a quarter to eleven o'clock. There was evidently something which the Earl wanted to say to me, and which I knew by his manner was affording him gratification to contemplate. Presently he began by observing that there would shortly be a bridal in the family, and that we should all be very busy for the next few days in making preparations for it; and then he added, 'Yes, there can be no doubt, Makepeace, everything is going on very comfortably; matters are coming to an issue at last; Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent will go together to the altar.'—His lordship then proceeded, in his own peculiar style, to descant upon a variety of arrangements which he had already thought of for the bridal; and amongst other things he spoke of the wedding-presents which he intended to make to his niece Miss Vincent.—'Makepeace,' he said, 'the evening before the wedding-day we will have all the gifts arranged upon the table in Isabella's dressing-room: she shall not know anything about it previously; so that when she retires for the night, she will be most agreeably surprised. I shall go to-morrow to buy a set of diamonds for her, and all sorts of jewels; and they shall be put into a beautiful casket. The Countess will of course contribute her presents according to her own good taste. But I tell you what I mean to have for the central ornament of the table. There shall be an elegant porcelain vase, filled with bright new sovereigns, all of her present Majesty's reign. In a word, Makepeace, I mean to have two thousand of them in this vase; and I think the present will be as handsome as *unique*.'—I ventured to suggest to his lordship that there might be some difficulty in procuring so many new sovereigns at so short a notice. His lordship smiled; and told me that for some time past—indeed from the very first moment that he thought of marrying Miss Vincent to his son—he had been thinking and preparing for this particular gift. I had access to all the cupboards in his rooms except one; and of this his lordship was wont to keep the key. He bade me take that key and open the cupboard to which it belonged. I did so; and his lordship, still with a smile, indicated a jar, the mouth of which was covered over with paper, and which I at first took to be a jar of preserves or pickles. His lordship lifted off the paper, and showed me that the jar was nearly filled with bright new sovereigns. He poured a quantity out upon the bed. At that very instant Satan whispered in my ear: that shining gold became an irresistible temptation—and that bed upon which it was thus poured out, became the bed of death on which the old man's blood was likewise to be poured out!"

Here Makepeace paused in the midst of his narrative of frightful interest, and which Mr. Slater was duly committing to paper. The murderer shaded his countenance with his hands for nearly a minute, and then slowly resumed his tale in the same deep hollow voice as before.

"His lordship informed me that there were exactly eighteen hundred sovereigns in that jar—for that whenever he had drawn money from his banker for some weeks past, he had carefully selected the coins of recent mintage and had deposited them there. He added that he should on the morrow call at his banker's and procure a sufficiency to make up the two thousand. After some more conversation, his lordship dismissed me for the night: and I retired to my own chamber. When there alone, the temptation assailed me with increasing force. Oh, I struggled hard against it!—but Satan appeared to be standing by my side and to whisper a thousand arguments into my ear. It seemed as if the tempter said, 'The Earl has communicated to no one else the existence of this hoarded treasure: it will not therefore be missed. You need not appropriate a single shilling from his purse, nor a single ring from amongst his jewels. Again, too, there are so many persons beneath this roof, that it will be impossible to fix the deed upon you if you only observe suitable caution. The Earl is capricious: you may think yourself necessary to him; but in one of his strange humours he may at any moment send you adrift; and you had better make a provision for yourself now that the means are within your reach.'—It was thus that the Evil One appeared to be tempting me; and I could not close my eyes against him. I will not extend this horrible narrative one moment longer than is absolutely necessary. Suffice it, then, to say that I yielded to the temptation. I had retired to my bed—but I rose and slipped on a few things. I was only dressed so far, Mr. Slater," added Makepeace, solemnly, "as I was just now when unconsciously re-enacting the crime in imagination, and when you detected me."

There was another pause in the murderer's narrative, but briefer than the former one; and he then continued in the following manner:—

"The mansion was all quiet: I crept stealthily down-stairs—I sought the lower premises, and procured a carving-knife, which I sharpened on the steel."

The lawyer and the constable shuddered visibly: Makepeace perceived it—and he likewise shuddered, as his eyes looked dread and hollow upon them both for an instant.

"Ah! you may well be shocked," he continued, in a tone which was at first scarcely audible; "you may well recoil to the innermost confines of your being! Would to God," he exclaimed, with sudden and passionate vehemence, "the past could be recalled!——but it cannot! No, it cannot!" he added, his voice again sinking into the solemn lowness of despair. "But let me proceed:"—for he saw that Mr. Slater had desisted from writing, as there was no necessity to take down irrevelant or mere ejaculatory matter. "Armed with the dreadful weapon, I ascended the stairs: but I already felt as if I were a murderer, and my very shadow upon the walls which I passed, while carrying a light in my hand, startled and terrified me. Twice I turned to convey the knife down stairs again and abandon my purpose: but the Tempter was again at my elbow—his words were whispered in my ears—and his huge palm, spread out, seemed to display before my eyes the whole mass of bright shining gold. I ascended. Noiselessly the door of the dressing-room swung upon its hinges—and I entered. The Earl never slept with a night-light in his room: he used to say that it kept him awake. I was afraid to take my candle into the chamber, for fear lest the light flashing upon his lordship's eyes, should startle and arouse him. I therefore left it in the dressing-room. Listening at the door of communication between that room and the chamber, I could tell by his measured breathing that he slept profoundly. I entered the chamber, and was compelled to let the door close behind me: for it was made thus to swing of itself on its hinges. There was only the faintest glimmer of the moonlight in the room. With naked feet I approached the bed: the surrounding draperies completely concealed the poor old nobleman's form—but I hastily felt with one hand to ascertain the exact position in which he lay. The other hand—the one which grasped the murderous weapon—just touched his throat: he moved—but the next instant all was over!"

Again did the lawyer and constable shudder: again too did Makepeace shudder likewise—and again were his eyes turned upon his two horrified listeners with an awful hollowness of gaze.

"I have but very little more to say," he continued. "The jar of gold, for which I had thus committed the fearful crime, came into my possession: but not another article in that room did I take away with me. I stole down-stairs; and having well cleansed the knife with which the deed was committed, placed it on some dish which remained upon the supper-table in the servants' hall,—taking care to bury the blade in the gravy, so that its recent frightful use for another purpose could not possibly be detected. I then stole out of the house, and interred my treasure in the garden. But at the bottom of the same hole I buried likewise my shirt, which was stained with blood. I regained my own room, confident that every precaution had been taken to prevent the authorship of the crime from being brought home to me. And strange to say, I lay down and slept; and when I awoke in the morning, I did not feel as if my dreams had been troubled—so that I was all the more hardened and all the better able to assume an air of perfect innocence. In accordance with my usual duty, I was the first to enter the chamber of the tragedy on that morning. I gave the alarm——But you know all the rest!"

Makepeace ceased speaking; and Mr. Slater said in a solemn voice, "You are of course aware that this confession which I have taken down, will be produced before the magistrate in whose presence you will have to stand within a few hours hence?"

"I know it," answered Makepeace in a low voice. "I feel easier now—my mind appears to be relieved of a weight:"—and then, after a pause, he added, "I shall no longer dread to be left alone in the darkness of this cell."

Mr. Slater and the constable accordingly withdrew; and in the office attached to the station-house, they signed their names as attesting witnesses of the murderer's confession.

An hour afterwards the constable visited the cell, in order to see that everything was right: for it is customary to maintain a certain vigilance over prisoners charged with very heinous crimes. But as the officer threw the light of the bull's-eye into the place, a loud ejaculation burst from his lips on perceiving the position in which the captive appeared to be lying. This was lengthways on the floor, but with his head raised about a foot and hanging completely back. A nearer inspection, instantaneously taken, revealed everything. There were two small holes close together in the plank-work that formed alike a seat and a bed for that cell: through these holes Makepeace had fastened one end of his neckerchief—the other extremity was fixed with a running noose about his neck—and thus the murderer had succeeded in strangling himself!

It is impossible to suppose that he had contemplated self-destruction at the time when, remorse-stricken, he had made his confession: it must therefore be conjectured that when again left to the awful solitude of that cell, and entombed in its stupendous darkness, his reason had reeled—and he had thus ended his days as a desperate suicide.

END OF VOL. I. FOURTH SERIES.

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